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UNDER GUIDING STARS

AGNES BLAKE POOR

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Under Guiding Stars

A Massachusetts Story of the Century End

By AGNES BLAKE POOR

Author of

"Boston Neighbours," "Brothers and Strangers," etc.

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
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1905

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UNDER GUIDING STARS

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I

A START IN LIFE

THERE was more than the wonted stir about the Wessex County court-house in the old shire town of Bethel on a bright spring morning of 189–. It was evident to the most ignorant or indifferent passer-by that a case of unusual interest was on the list for the day, although the scarcity of women in the crowd showed that it was no exciting criminal trial. Had such a passing stranger been tempted to enter, he would probably have been disappointed, for the drama had reached its closing scene, intelligible only to those who had followed it from the first. The great suit of James S. Jennison against Thomas A. Hart, though its ostensible stake was but a couple or so of paltry thousands, had turned upon a legal

point whose decision either way was certain to establish an important precedent, bearing so directly on the relations of municipal governments, that not only the Wessex bar and the county officials, but members of similar classes from beyond the county and even the State lines were crowding the hall with all the eager interest of an initiated audience. There was nothing new to hear so far as the facts were concerned. The case had already passed the lower court. The story, a short one, had all been told; and then had followed arguments as to whether two little scraps of dirty manuscript were admissible as evidence. The lower court had decided that they were, and the jury, as a sequence, had found for the plaintiff with costs and damages; but the defendant had appealed to the superior court, and the whole process had been gone through again. The presiding judge had carried the point at issue before the whole bench, whose opinion was now to be announced and the case must then be speedily decided.

If it were of interest to the people of Bethel on its own merits, it was none the less so by reason of the personality and local prominence of the actors. First on the bench sat Judge Langdon, of old Bethel stock, and still a familiar presence there, although his eminent legal talents had opened for him a long career

in wider fields; and the leaders of the opposing counsel were two of the best known members of the Wessex bar. Ralph Wentworth, much the senior, appeared for the defendant, and William Noyes, young, but fast rising in his profession, for the plaintiff. Each had, as all present well knew, his own mighty stake at issue — his character, the object of his life— and there was a general long-drawn breath as each took his place. Wentworth, a small elderly man, at the first glance looked younger than he was, by virtue of the quick motions of his thin wiry figure, and his thick black locks, scarcely powdered with white; but the impression was soon corrected by the yellow paleness of his skin, and the hard-set lines of his features. They never showed a sign of life, even when his high-pitched, thin, but clear and far-reaching voice was pouring forth its bitterest sarcasms. It was Wentworth's eye alone which woke then, and that blazed like a lamp in a tomb.

William Noyes was a broad-shouldered, ruddy, sturdy young fellow, who had, four years ago, also looked younger than his years, but whose mobile face had had time to change since then. He had begun to feel the truth of that saying of one of earth's wisest, "Never get into a quarrel with one who has nothing to lose"; and to feel that the warning applied to

"Old Wentworth," as the bearer of that name was called in varying accents, although he was the head of one of the oldest and highest of Bethel families, which showed no sign of bating its pride, though its fortunes had been dwindling for the last few generations under successive divisions. As the commerce which had laid the foundations of their wealth decayed, the men of the name took to professions; but they were a lavish, courtly race, who found it easier to spend than to work; and their present chief, though by some unaccountable cross-alliance, of very different stock from his predecessors, was no exception in this. Sharp as he was at the law, he had never made enough out of it for his ostensible expenses even; and he had unacknowledged ones, which, though cheap of their kind, ran away, as is the wont of such, with ten pence to every one he spent in open market.

Mr. Wentworth felt that society owed a man in his position a living, and had considered the means of getting it with the least trouble. He had lost his chance of making it by marriage for the transitory glory of carrying off one of the beautiful Miss Halsteads, who brought him high connections, but no money. Many of her friends had thought her taste odd, even then, and since her death he had not increased in the attractions which might win a wife with

a fortune worth his while. He must try some other way, and one was clearly indicated. He had all the qualities of a demagogue, and there was plenty of material to work on in Bethel, as in most New England cities. It reeked with foreigners, every man of them with his vote. Nothing could be simpler; a little rant in public about equality, and the rights of the poor; the beauties of democracy, and the glorious memory of Andrew Jackson; and a short but comprehensive bargain in private, adjusted the matter to the satisfaction of all the parties concerned. For a number of years, things revolved in unbroken continuity. Wentworth held the position of what might be called the city's "boss," though not openly designated by so coarse a term. He worked off acre after acre of his valueless marsh land at high prices on the city for a park, for whose improvement the city treasury was to expend further money in "jobs" which his friends were to get, and in the prospect of which they mustered strong at the ward meetings and at the polls, and carried the nomination and election of his candidates for aldermen in three fourths of the wards. Meanwhile, a fine piece of land, fit for park purposes, must go a-begging, because it did not belong to any of his partisans; and, moreover, under his influence, the City Council refused to make any improvements on

it, so that one of his clients had a chance to buy it cheap, when the owner's necessities forced it upon the market.

Another neatly cut-and-dried scheme of his was the selling of his own lots of land on the best streets to his followers at high rates on credit, for the erection of tenement houses thereon; both parties drawing profit from the levying of blackmail upon the neighbors, who were forced to buy in the land at exorbitant prices, to avoid injury to their own contiguous property; Wentworth, meanwhile, posing as a friend of the virtuous poor, and a contemner of the haughty aristocrat.

The higher classes of the place did not like his rule, but they bore it submissively, barring an occasional outburst of complaint. After all, he was a Wentworth, and more or less nearly related to all of themselves. He was uncle by marriage to Charley Binney, heir of all the great accumulated Binney wealth. The Binneys, like his other kinsfolk, held him at arm's length. Mrs. Binney, in her incautious youth, was known to have declared that he had killed her sister, since whose death she had never crossed his threshold; and even good-natured Charley was shy and short of speech with his uncle, but it was not likely they would take any active part against him, if only for his children's sake, on whom there was no social

ban. Then his tongue, which stuck at no Billingsgate his copious imagination could suggest, was feared by all. Who so sure of his own past and present as not to dread what he might pour out if brought to bay? He was like a familiar animal who is best let alone. Had he lived in the Southern States, a stray bullet would long ago have disposed of him, but in the city of peace where he was born such violent measures were unheard of. Lastly, he was one of their own class, and had his own vested interest in the place, which might restrain him from pushing matters too far. It was safer to have him in the post of boss than the Tim Doolan or Napoleon Corneau who might be his successor.

Now all this was very grievous to the soul of William Noyes, who came of a Bethel family as old as the Wentworths, though his particular branch of it had never ranked higher than as respectable. Indeed, his grandfather had worked with his own hands at shoemaking in the same shop in which his father had carried on the business on a more extended scale. These worthy men had given him a good education and left him a snug little property, with no one to share it but his mother, a quiet, gentle woman who lived for him alone. He had chosen a profession which he liked, and in which he was rising fast. He had hosts of

friends, and there was nothing to prevent his attaining any social level he pleased.

Possessing all these advantages, young Mr. Noyes considered that it behooved him to accomplish something for the world in his day and generation, and thereby risked the loss of every one of them. He had been brought up in strict reverence and respect for the memory of the Puritans, and town meetings, and the Federal Constitution, and many other choice antiquities, and not only loved his native city as representing all these, but had a personal affection for every foot of earth in it. It irked his mind, even as a boy, to see stately tree after tree levelled on the old Bosworth farm, and one cheap little house after another squeezed together all over it. His soul revolted as he grew to man's estate at being ruled by a set of ignorant foreigners; and when he had to put his hand deep in his own pocket to keep a four-storied Irish colony off the piece of land next to his mother's house, a sense of personal injury added poignancy to his sense of justice offended, and in an unwonted heat of shame and anger he vowed that he would be the one to bell the cat.

I cannot enlarge here on the struggle William Noyes began at four-and-twenty, as indeed it is told with abundance of detail in the public prints; how he wrote to the newspapers and

called public indignation meetings, how he organized a Municipal Reform Club and a Law- and Order Society, and did half the work of both; how he toiled late and early, in season and out of season. After three years he was still carrying on the struggle, with but scanty prospect of finding any breach in the ring. To what motive or sentiment in its members could he appeal? Between him and them there was a great gulf fixed. To him they were a dirty, squalid crowd, a few degrees above the brutes; yet, as he was a kind-hearted man, he would have been willing enough to do something for their benefit, could he have done it in his own way; that is, could he in the process have removed them and their dirt and their squalor out of his immediate vicinity. But to this they saw no reason for submitting. What was the beauty or comfort or fair repute of Bethel to them? They had never known what it was to care for such things as these. They had drifted there with the animal instinct of finding fresh feeding grounds, and their one object was to get as much pay for as little work as they possibly could.

The taxpayers, from whom opposition to their extortions might be expected, were, some utterly absorbed in their private affairs and heedless of all that did not appear to their limited vision to touch them immediately;

others, more energetic, divided by a hundred prejudices and disputes, social, religious, and political; incapable of action, unless it were exactly in the way they wished. William Noyes was regarded by them, sometimes with admiration for his courage, sometimes with pity for his temerity, sometimes with reprobation as a disturber of the public peace. With the majority, these feelings alternated, with a tendency to settle into the latter, as time passed on without visible effects. He made a host of enemies who assailed him in public and private with savage disregard of truth or courtesy. His private business was perforce neglected, and his income diminished. The more fashionable class of his acquaintance began to treat him coolly, as a mistaken if well-meaning "crank," and Ralph Wentworth spoke of him with a chuckle worse than a sneer.

But William Noyes had the stubborn English faculty of never knowing when he was beaten, and the advantage of being only half the age of his antagonist. His unflagging attacks left their mark, and a trifling circumstance that might have passed unnoticed by a less vigilant fighter gave him the opportunity for bringing the law to bear upon one of Wentworth's associates. He won the case, and Wentworth was incidentally shown up in open court as guilty of practices fatal to his legal and personal char-

acter. But what did that matter to him or his followers? He carried an appeal on a point of law, and if possible increased their admiration. For aught they knew, he could carry on this process forever; and they now crowded the court room, eager to see by what new device he was going to "order it up" as if it were a game at euchre. The better informed, and every lawyer present, while sure how the case ought to go, were a little under the spell of Wentworth's long rule, and could hardly believe that he would not "wriggle out of it" in some way. Even William Noyes was not without a lurking dread, hardly acknowledged to himself, of his enemy's unfathomable resources.

The facts were in, the pleas were made, and attentively followed, though heard before. And now a deeper hush fell on the crowd, as Judge Langdon, thin, stooping, and scholarly, began to give the opinion of the assembled bench, in low, gentle tones, and with a mild, courteous manner, as if he were trying to explain the matter to a group of ladies. Not a word was lost by a single hearer. "You will therefore," he concluded, addressing the jury, "consider of your verdict in the light of all the evidence as presented. You may now retire."

"It will not be necessary," said the foreman,

rising. "I express the unanimous opinion of the jury in giving our verdict for the plaintiff, with costs, and the same amount of damages as was assessed by the county court."

"You —— hypocritical, hired gang!" shouted Wentworth, springing to his feet, his temper, once well held in control when its indulgence threatened any risk, now forcing itself to the surface with utter disregard of consequences; "and you —— pack of bought-up ——! I 'll have justice — justice, do you hear? if it is to be had in this rotten old State of Massachusetts!"

"Silence!" said the judge, Wentworth's own cousin, in low, slow, quiet tones, an octave below their usual pitch. "Mr. Wentworth, the Court adjudges you to the payment of a fine of fifty dollars for contempt, and to immediate arrest for any further disturbance. It is to be hoped that you will see the impropriety of again appearing before the Wessex bench. The court will now adjourn until three o'clock this afternoon."

Then came a general rise and stir, and flocking together and dispersing, of all the heterogeneous elements of the great crowd. Ralph Wentworth, beaten he did not yet know how utterly, slunk quietly off to rally his scattered forces. He had fight left in him yet, and those boys should feel it. The winning party for

the present enjoyed a clear possession of the field, and the senior counsel held the chief place, for his client, a respectable John Doe, hardly held a more prominent position than the less reputable Richard Roe on the other side. William Noyes found himself the centre of an eager, hand-shaking crowd, overflowing with compliments and presages of future greater successes yet to come, all of which he took very coolly, well aware that half of these admirers had dubbed him a fool but yesterday. Their present support might be sincere, and would certainly be useful. But there were a few, chiefly young men like himself, who had been his stanch supporters through good and evil report, unshaken in their faith that "Bill Noyes" would put through whatever he undertook. These deserved a warmer acknowledgment for the unstinted spontaneous outburst of their sympathy, and they should be rewarded by going home with him to carry the news to his mother.

There was very little of a scene on this occasion. William always had his feelings well under control, and his mother took her tone from him. She had known little or nothing of the merits of the case, being only sure that dear William must be right, and that in the end every one would surely acknowledge it. Her chief feeling now was thankfulness that the

end had come before the strain on his nerves had grown too great. She had marked, if no one else had, the gray hair or two in his thick fair locks, and the faint lines on his open brow. She knew that he had begun to find out what sleepless nights and untasted meals are like, and he had even, now and then, spoken shortly to her. Mingled with her grateful joy for this relief, was a little bit of self-gratulation for having had the foresight to provide a dainty lunch in ample measure for her uninvited guests. What woman so happy as she, till Winslow Hall, the most intimate, latest lingerer, incautiously advised his friend to "look out for Wentworth's bullies; he has plenty of them ready to hand."

"Oh, yes, William! don't go out alone in the evenings; not just now, at any rate."

"The old rascal is n't quite fool enough for that," said William, laughing as he threw back his head in conscious strength.

"He might shoot you."

"Nonsense!"

"But he might hire some ruffian or other—they might set fire to this house."

"Let them try it. He 'd only end by getting himself into court again. I don't care how often he 's seen there."

"It seems a pity to have him go on exposing himself, though," said Winslow Hall.

"I don't pity him. He deserves more than he got."

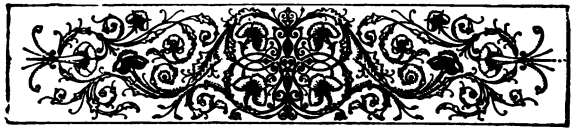
"Yes, but whenever he gets home, he makes it mighty unpleasant all round. They say, whenever he 's hard hit outside, he lets it all out on Miss Wentworth, and she 's too sweet a girl to hear the sort of stuff he favors the crowd with."

William Noyes was silent, while a picture of Miss Wentworth rose in his mind's eye, vivid, though he had but little material from which to recall it. The passing glimpse of a fair face through a carriage pane; the distant view of a soft coil of brown hair under a curling feather; the quiver of an eyelash as she bent her head in church; the flitting shadow of a slender, graceful form; all combined to create an image of something exquisitely rare and precious and out of reach. The very name of Ruth Wentworth rang like a faint wandering strain of music in his ear. The young lady had grown up in his own town, but their ways were wide apart. He had, of course, often met her brother Roland, and her cousin, Charley Binney, but they were just younger enough to have precluded any great intimacy as boys, and when they grew older his proceedings against "Old Wentworth" had naturally produced a coolness—what with any other men would have been a coldness—between him and

them. Miss Wentworth was younger still; and with all William Noyes's successes, he had never entered the circle in which, under the care of her aunt, Mrs. Binney, she met only the most carefully weeded out part of the very best society. Mrs. Binney, though she would not enter her brother-in-law's house, had never ceased to care for his children, and if the boy were beyond her control, it was absolute over the girl. She had engaged governesses and masters for her niece, and paid them out of her own pocket; had dressed her exquisitely, also at her own expense; and had taken her on journeys, though she hated travelling herself. She detested going out, too, and though her house was always open, and her hospitalities elegant, they were limited. As Ruth grew older, she exerted herself to give them a more lively character, and arranged visits for her niece with a few intimate friends at whose town or country houses William Noyes had but little chance of meeting the young lady, especially as he never made the least effort to do so. He knew that Miss Wentworth was not at all the sort of girl that he should like. It was a foolish thing, he thought, and worse than foolish, to bring up an American young woman like a foreign princess. His ideal went to the public schools, and finished with perhaps a term at the Normal. She was a girl with no

nonsense about her, able to teach school, to cook or darn stockings on occasion, and yet to hold her own in any society; just such a girl as is depicted for admiration in the "ladies' column" of a respectable country newspaper.

Nevertheless, though the reverse of romantic in all his tastes and ideas, he could not help appreciating the romance of the situation, according to all historic and poetic precedent; and if he thought he avoided his enemy's lovely daughter from contemptuous determination not to add another page to the stuff that novels are made of, the real motive was as likely to be a dread, too absurd to acknowledge to himself, that prosaic reality might spoil the vision; and the "stainless rose of Godwin's thorny stem" lose on full view some of the glory of bloom and fragrance of which, perhaps, his fancy lent her half as she hung high above and out of reach. But he could not help an occasional intrusive thought of her in all the press of added work, which now came so fast and ran off so quickly with the enlivening impulse of success.



II

THE MONTAGUES AND THE CAPULETS

WITH increase of business William's social prestige kept pace, and his name was put on to all manner of lists, resulting in the receipt of begging letters by the score, some impersonal in print, some pressing in manuscript. Also, he was favored with invitations from the most particular circles, many of which, to be sure, were none the less covert appeals for cash; and so it came about that on a fine evening in April he was travelling up to Boston carefully arrayed in his dress suit under a light ulster, with a bit of pasteboard in his pocket, for which he had been allowed as a favor, and with a proper voucher, to pay five dollars; for it was a ticket of admission to the Private Theatricals in Horticultural Hall for the benefit of the Home for Incurables. The patronesses were selected from the very smartest set, and Mrs. Tom Silloway, and Mrs. Walter Fletcher, and Miss Rosie Robbins, and Roland Wentworth, and Montague Stephens,

and Archie Perkins, were to act; even the very "supes" were to be swells of the first magnitude, and the costumes and scenery were to be on a scale of such magnificence that it was to be feared the Incurables might find themselves, at the end, with a deficit.

William Noyes went somewhat unwillingly, grudging the time he was about to spend on a show which promised him but little pleasure. He rarely went to the theatre, and when he did he spent his money on a first-class professional performance. He expected very little from amateur actors, no matter to what set they belonged, and as he knew but few of them, he could not expect the satisfaction, dear to the female mind, of criticising his friends' appearance in their costumes. But among his Boston acquaintance was a young mate of his college days, to whom he had been of as much service as a steady and highly placed senior can be to a clever, warm-hearted, and very simple-minded freshman. Tom Herrick still retained his boyish qualities, and had consequently been drawn in to take a part in the performance, for which young men were in demand to dance in a ball-room scene. The honor was weighted with twenty tickets, to be sold only to "nice" people, and on no account to be returned. In this emergency he had applied to his friend William Noyes, as good-

natured and well-to-do. William was good-natured, and had bought a ticket to help the lad out; he was well-to-do, and, as naturally follows, prudent, and was now about to use it rather than see his five dollars utterly go to waste.

He knew that twice as many seats would be sold as there was room for in the hall, and was resigned to standing the whole evening, as is the lot of his sex at amateur shows. However there are differences in standing room, and he was determined to get there early; but he had a quick noticing eye for trifles, of use to him in his profession, and as he passed along with the out-going stream from the old Causeway Street Station, he observed at the door of the ladies' waiting-room the figure of a woman who was gazing at the passing crowd with painful interest, as if to identify some one among them. Sometimes she would advance a step or two, then draw back as if in terror not affected, for she seemed a young slender girl, though hidden by her heavy wrap and veil. Without seeing her face, he paused and said, "I beg your pardon, but can I be of any use to you, Miss Wentworth?" In spite of his extreme surprise, he added the last words as quietly as if they were not an after-thought, and something in his manner seemed to reassure her at once.

"Oh, thank you! I don't know—you are very kind, but—I am not sure. I don't well know what to do."

"You have missed your friends, I suppose?"

"Yes, that is it." She was throwing, between her hurried breaths, quick little glances at his face, to which she could not attach a name. But she was very sure she had seen him "somewhere," and he knew her, and he was a gentleman, so with returning ease she went on: "I came up from Bethel on the train before this, and the Burgesses were to meet me at the station. I was going to the Theatricals at Horticultural Hall with them, and home with them afterwards; but they never came, and I thought—I hoped, they might have meant this train. But it is getting late, and they will begin in half an hour." Her pretty lip quivered, like a disappointed child's.

"The hall will be full already. I would not wait any longer."

"Of course, I can't go there by myself! I don't know what to do! I could go back to Bethel, but then the Burgesses would be frightened. My box has gone there. There must be some mistake! Perhaps on the whole, if you will kindly get me a cab, I will go to their house, and wait till they come home."

"But then you will miss the performance, and that would be too bad."

"I don't want to. Roland—my brother—is to act, and I did so wish to see him. But every one I know must have gone by this time."

"I am going there. If you will allow me the honor of escorting you, we can easily find your friends."

"Oh, thank you! You are very kind, but——"

"It is much the best way," said the young man, who was now finding time to admire the play of ingenuous expression on the delicate features and transparent skin and large limpid eyes, over which a faint cloud now passed as she said, hesitatingly, "Thank you so much. I am sure—I mean, I ought to remember you, but I am so stupid. I am sure we must have met somewhere."

"I do not think I have ever had the pleasure of meeting you, Miss Wentworth, though I recognized you immediately. I know your brother, and your cousin, Mr. Binney. My name is William Noyes."

He felt some dread of the effects of this announcement. What if she should think filial duty required her to turn her back and walk off, leaving him stranded? But she appeared by no means disturbed.

"Oh, yes! I must have seen you at church or somewhere, for I was sure I knew you. I

did mean to go to the Burgesses first—but I dressed at Bethel for fear of being late—and my hat—but I can take off my hat."

This argument having been held with an invisible inner self, who apparently gave up the contest, she turned to the young man, who had been waiting without venturing an opinion on matters of which he was so profoundly ignorant, and with a charming smile, which showed beautiful teeth, said, "Well, since you are so kind——"

"That 's right; we have no time to lose," said her companion; and in two minutes' time he had secured a cab, and they were rattling across town. As they sat side by side, they could not help looking at each other, and the look ended in an irrepressible laugh from both.

"It seems so funny!" said the girl.

"It was the only thing to do. It would never have done for you to have missed it."

"Yes, but my aunt; what will she say?"

"Why, she can't mind. It was not your fault. I am very glad I happened to be there, that 's all."

So was Ruth, though she did not say so. She had an extra source of satisfaction apart from not missing the performance. In all her life she had hardly had the mildest adventure, and this was such an exciting one! If it was dawning upon William's slower brain that

another page had been turned in the novel in which his life, spite of himself, seemed fated to be cast, it was palpable to Ruth's, which had been nourished on poetry and romance, though not of the newest pattern. She never read the papers; but she knew that William Noyes had had a lawsuit, or something of the kind, with her father. She had heard him daily made the theme of very unsavory discourse by Mr. Wentworth, with a running accompaniment of oaths; but to this sort of thing she rarely lent much attention; it did not necessarily involve anything to the young man's discredit, and others spoke highly of him. All the mighty life-and-death struggle which he and her father had carried on for years, had affected her less than seeing her cat catch a bird in the garden. Still, she would hardly have thought it the thing for them to be presented to each other at any one's party, the proper place for modern heroes and heroines to meet; but here he was introduced to her without her consent, in a way no one could help. Was ever maiden of poet's tale in a more romantic situation? And as to the girls she knew, what were the themes of their silly commonplace chatter compared to this? Perhaps it would not be nice in her to see any more of Mr. Noyes with her own volition; but probably fortune would take care of that, too; not that she had gone so far as to forecast any-

thing definite. She only seemed to be reading about herself as if she were a girl in a book; and things could happen to that girl, quite beyond the real one's experiences.

As she thought all this, she sat silent; but William thought that showed better taste than to chatter too freely, and was entirely satisfied with contemplating the delicate lines of her profile. They reached the hall, and at once found themselves merged in a crowd so dense, that it could hardly be seen whether they were together, or whom they were with, till they were greeted with "Miss Wentworth! how glad I am to see you; we had almost given you up, but my grandmother is keeping a place for you. Let me take your wrap. I am afraid there was some misunderstanding about meeting you at the train. Miss Lewis only came just before we set out, and could not find Mrs. Binney's note, or remember what she said. I should have set out for the station, but I thought it would be of no use so late, and I hoped you would not wait, but were coming with some one else."

"It was no matter," said Ruth, rather coldly; "Mr. Noyes saw me across town."

"How are you, Noyes? Glad to see you. Pretty well crammed here already. But it 's all right for Miss Wentworth. I 've saved a seat for her, only I 'm so sorry—" Further

regrets and apologies were lost as the young man pushed on through the throng, and Ruth, following, threw off her wrap and hat, and appeared in a simple but dainty demi-toilette. There were plenty of women there in the fullest of full dress, but this Mrs. Binney would not allow her niece in a public hall.

It would have been perfectly proper now for Mr. Noyes to make his bow and leave her, but this he could not bring himself to do, so long as that slight turn of her head, that faint shimmering glance now and then through her long eyelashes, gave him encouragement to follow; and he kept close behind her up the aisle, till she paused at last, close by the stage.

"Oh, you sweet dear thing!" cried a young lady who sat at the end of the front row; "we have been so worried about you! I have been in perfect agonies, have n't I, Mr. Robbins? Here, sit right down by me; of course we kept it for you. Now do tell us all about it, and if you were terribly frightened!"

William had found very contracted standing room close by the ladies, and being obliged to hear every word they said, felt that he might legitimately indulge his curiosity in hearing Miss Wentworth set forth their adventure.

"Thank you," she said quietly, "I met a friend."

"Oh, how nice! Of course she would meet

some one; I said so, did n't I, dear Mrs. Burgess?" turning to a stout elderly lady on Ruth's other side; for the fair speaker had contrived to have her friend squeeze past her, and retained her position of vantage, the "end seat"; and when Mrs. Burgess, who seemed to have just taken in the fact of Ruth's arrival, had slowly drawled out a few scarcely audible words of welcome, she went on: "You see, dear, it was this way; I put your dear aunt's note into my bag, I am sure I did; and sent it to dear Mrs. Burgess's this morning when I first came up; and then I had so much to do, so many calls, and I went to tea at Effie Alger's; and when I got to Mrs. Burgess's, I had hardly time to dress before dinner—they had dinner so early, you know, on account of this—and I could n't find the note anywhere. Very likely when I took it out, I mislaid it in my hurry. You never do such dreadful things, you are always so thoughtful; and I did n't know what your plans were at all. But it does n't make any difference now, does it, dear? as long as you are all dressed?"

"No—not if my hair does n't look too much out of order. I had to take off my hat when I came in."

"Oh, it does n't matter for your lovely hair, so thick, with its natural wave; it always looks so beautiful, no matter what happens to it.

It does n't need to be fussed over like mine. That sweet gown! I should n't think you 'd have wanted to wear it on the train, and crush it all up under your cloak."

"Roland asked me to."

"Yes, you are always so lovely to Roland! But who would n't be, when he dotes on you so? And he 's so proud of you! What exquisite flowers! Who are they for?"

"My aunt sent them for Rosie. Mr. Noyes," she went on, leaning past her friend, "perhaps you will be kind enough to hand them up when Miss Robbins comes on?"

"With the greatest pleasure."

"Sarah, do you know Mr. Noyes? Mrs. Burgess—Miss Lewis, Mr. Noyes."

Mrs. Burgess made a languid inclination of her head, and Miss Lewis began briskly, "I believe I 've seen you, Mr. Noyes, though I really can't think where, just now."

"At Mrs. Thayer's, I think, some years ago."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Thayer—he 's my cousin, you know—thinks so highly of you. I heard him speaking of you the other day, about your speech, that every one admired so much." She stopped short, and colored, with a quick glance at Ruth, but Ruth, calm and unconscious, was talking to Mrs. Burgess, and Miss Lewis went on; "I did not know you knew

Ruth. Is n't she a most beautiful creature? Her dear aunt, too—I never saw any one so perfectly lovely as Mrs. Binney!"

"I only know Miss Wentworth very slightly. I never met Mrs. Binney."

"But you know Charley, I suppose. Charley is so nice, is n't he?"

"He 's a very good fellow."

"He is going to act, and his costume is perfectly splendid; and Roland—you know Roland?" with a conscious look.

"A little."

"It must be such fun to act! I should like to, only I know I could never learn a part. Mrs. Tom Silloway wanted Ruth to act, but Mrs. Binney would n't hear of it. She is very particular about Ruth, and no wonder. Ruth is such a beauty, is n't she?"

"I think Miss Wentworth very pretty," said William. The word beauty, he thought, hardly applied to that girlish shape, slim as a reed, those features on which the artist's hand seemed still at work, those clear soft tints on which light and shade melted softly into each other, and he spoke earnestly, though with an unavowed reservation, that there was something more than beauty there.

"Oh, she is the loveliest girl out! and that is saying a great deal, for there are so many lovely girls!" went on the young lady.

William, who by this time had taken a good look at her, decided that she might have been rather pretty herself, if her rather too light eyes could only rest on one point a moment, and her small mouth would not twist itself about so desperately when she spoke. He knew perfectly well who she was, though he had not met her lately, Mrs. Thayer's door having been closed upon him after one invitation. Miss Lewis was related to all the first families of Wessex County extraction, and, having no parents and small means, lived about among them. Her circumstances made no eligible young man an object of indifference to her, and she was continuing her remarks with a particularly gracious smile for him, when the last bell suddenly rang, only half an hour late, and the curtain rose on *Romeo and Juliet.*

The reasons for the selection of this play were not at first palpable to the uninitiated. The performers could not act, but that seemed to make no difference. One and all were received with thunders of applause and showers of bouquets. Especially were these reiterated at every speech of the chief favorites: Romeo, a dark, handsome young fellow in a light wig, who looked desperately bored, and whose words were inaudible beyond the two front benches; Mercutio, an older man, small and stammering, whose speeches were chiefly re-

cited by the prompter; Peter, fat, fair-haired, and boyish, who was introduced much oftener than the text called for, though he did nothing but strive to subdue his too audible laughter; and Lady Capulet, a pretty girl of eighteen or so, with a lisp and stage fright. But most especially was the enthusiasm of the audience excited by the Nurse, who, though not so young or slender as she had been, still showed a shapely pair of scarlet ankles under an extremely short petticoat as she toddled about the stage, and whose over-acting, though pushed to the verge of caricature, was a welcome relief to the languor of the others.

But when Juliet's turn to enter came, and her tall, supple, splendid shape threw itself with one lightning movement into the very centre of the stage, and the ill-assorted crowd fell at once into proper place about her, what a gleam of life and freshness was there! She had known better than to "make up" her clear olive skin more than was necessary, and surely no other than her own dark locks could ever wreathe so softly, so closely, round her stately youthful head. How the eye longed to recall every line of her, to arrest her in every one of the flowing, fleeting poses which seemed to crowd each other from the scene by the very redundance of her life! With her on the stage, her sulky lover and frightened mother were

warmed to the proper point, and the Nurse's gushing twaddle sounded pure nature. Her flowers fell unheeded, but for one flash of her eye, which stopped the applause at its birth. Every eye was fixed, and every tongue was silent, till the close of the first act, when the actors, having after repeated calls refused to appear before the curtain, every man in the audience leaning back warm with effort, said to the girl at his side, "How like, how very like, Roland Wentworth is to his sister!" and every girl responded, "Yes — but twice as handsome!"

III

LE MONDE OÙ L'ON S'AMUSE

PERHAPS William Noyes, of all the audience, was least carried away by the startling success of Mr. Roland Wentworth's appearance in the character of Juliet. He could be deeply, but not easily, influenced. He was not one who could separate the work from the worker, and for him thoroughly to enjoy art, there must be at least some pretence at reality. If he might have found it possible, though difficult, to forget that the beauty on the stage was a young man like himself, there was a point beyond which he could not strain his imagination. He could not watch the virginal freedom of her steps without unpleasant recollections of the times when he had seen Roland Wentworth a good deal more than half seas over; or listen to those tones, fervid yet pure as organ notes in holy masses, without the devil at his heart whispering some of the jests he had heard that ready tongue fling at women, and at which, to his shame, he had laughed.

As the play went on, and the spectators, critical and uncritical alike, abandoned themselves to the fascination of seeing Juliet, the ideal, the real Juliet at once before them—a woman's love laid bare, passionate to the very whiteness of heat, yet pure as coolest morning dew; tender as a mother with a baby, and simple-sweet as a child with a father—he grew more painfully perplexed. Where had Roland learned all this? He looked at Ruth, sitting so near him, and was forced to confess that the resemblance of brother and sister, which he had heard buzzed around him, was in many points striking; but he heaved a sigh of relief, as he saw how little the quiet admiration on her pretty, tranquil face struck below the surface. He could not have borne to know that any of her brother's conception of the character should have been borrowed from her.

"Oh, is n't it lovely?" sighed Miss Lewis, when the curtain at last went down for positively the last time, before an audience on whom neither the long waits between the acts, nor the lateness of the hour, had told; "I don't know which acted best, do you? Mrs. Silloway, she is always so good, and dear Rosie, she is too sweet; and Roland—was n't Roland perfectly stunning? and Charley was so funny! Do you want to get out, dear Mrs. Burgess? I suppose you are in a hurry."

"Come, grandmamma, don't you want to be off?" said young Robbins, appearing from behind the scenes; "they won't be long. I told 'em to come in their costumes—make it more fun."

Mrs. Burgess ponderously rose. She had never done a voluntary act in her life. She was born rich and had married wealth, without her own volition being called into play, and those around her told her what she must do with her money. Some of her friends were philanthropic, and had told her that she must be on the list of patronesses for these theatricals, and lend her influence; some were fashionable, and had insisted that her granddaughter, Rosie Robbins, should act in them; and when she had feebly objected, her objections were put down with the arguments that no one could possibly mind taking such a very proper part as Lady Capulet, and that Rosie might dress it as becomingly as she liked. Some were bent on gayety, and had suggested that she should invite the performers to supper afterward; and now she was rather sleepily asking her immediate neighbors, who were all her intimates, to this festivity. "I should be very glad to see you too, Mr.—Joyce?" she added, as her eye lighted upon—it could not well avoid—the tall figure of the young man near her. She was always kind and courteous

when it occurred to her. William hesitated a moment from some notion that his own dignity required that he should not catch at such an invitation, but, as people usually do when they hesitate, he yielded. He had some doubts whether it would be a proper entertainment for Miss Wentworth to be at, and in that case he certainly ought to go and see how improper it was; nor was he quite so superior as to have no other motive. In the first respect he was agreeably disappointed. No glaring impropriety could struggle against the solid weight of Mrs. Burgess at her own supper table, even though it were past midnight; and her grandchildren were nice young people, if they had not been deluded into the notion that they were ornaments of the "smart set," so that Ned Robbins gambled, and his sister giggled and flirted, purely from a sense of duty. Mrs. Tom Silloway was quiet enough, as was her wont when *ingénues* were of the party; and Miss Wentworth was evidently regarded as the star of the occasion. Her cousin, Charley Binney, sat next her, and this seemed to be regarded by some of the party as conveying a meaning. Nothing was said, but enough was inferred by their manner to set William Noyes to speculating.

"Why, Roland! what a shame! you had no right to change!" was the general cry, as that

young man entered, last of all, in the evening costume of the nineteenth century.

"As if I did n't know better than to break the illusion! But here I am, what my devotion to your cause has left of me," he added, as he shook hands with Mrs. Burgess. "What am I, without my moustache?"

"Dear me! what harm does that do?" asked Miss Rosie, by whom he now drew up his chair.

"It deprives my kisses of all point—for a month at least."

"Dear me! does it?"

"Does n't it?" inquired Roland with a sudden turn to Mrs. Tom Silloway, his other neighbor, who, taken by surprise, flushed all through and over the very superior quality of artificial red which she still retained on her face, but recovered herself with a laugh, a blow of the fan, and "You horrid boy!"

"Pray be careful—I 'd rather you 'd subdue your tenderness when Ruth is around — she might tell my aunt."

The hint was taken, and further conversation was carried on in a low tone, interspersed with stifled bursts of laughter from the ladies, which did not interrupt the less lively conversation at the upper end of the table. At three o'clock the party broke up.

"How d'ye do, Noyes?" said Roland, as

the two met at the door. "A few of us are going round to Mrs. Tom's for breakfast—you 'd better come."

But William declined, feeling no desire to see how far Roland and Mrs. Silloway could carry things when Ruth was not present.

"You 've met my sister, this evening, she tells me."

"I had that pleasure."

"When do you go back?"

"To-morrow afternoon."

"We go day after. We 've a coaching party, Saturday afternoon; suppose you join us. I drive Binney's bays. We meet at his house at half after three."

"I do not know——"

"Oh, it 's all right with Charley—hey, Charley?" as Charley Binney, who had only heard the last words, grinned a cordial assent. "My aunt chaperons it—have you met my aunt?"

"No,—perhaps Mrs. Binney may wish to make up her own party?" said William, though with a suddenly roused wish to go, on finding that ladies were to be of the party.

"She 'll like to see any one I bring;" and as his companion was silent; "What! you don't suppose we 've got to cut each other because you and my dad have had a rumpus? Bless you, if that followed, I should n't have many friends left. My aunt takes no stock in these

things—she 'll know you 're all right if I present you to her."

"Thank you, I should like to go very much," said William, unable to resist. He wondered whether Roland acted from pure good-nature; Roland could be good-natured, but he often had his own turn to serve as well. What that might be now, unless the borrowing of a little money, William could not imagine. It would be very disgraceful for Roland, but that was not his affair. He could afford to lend a certain amount, even at the risk of never seeing it again; and he thought he could depend on himself for knowing just when to stop—a faculty, indeed, to which he owed much of his success in life.

IV

FLOWER AND LEAF

HIS dawning regard for Miss Wentworth did not yet dominate him to the extent of altering his business plans so as to stay in Boston another day, and travel in her society; but it carried him early on Saturday to the door of the Binney house, a stately structure of old times, where Mrs. Binney lived by preference three quarters of the year. There were Roland and Charley, and Ned Robbins, but no ladies as yet. But punctually at the hour, down came the mistress of the house, tall, slender, and stately in her rich quiet mourning, just not so deep as to be noticeable. She was well known by sight to William, but now she stood endued in his eyes with fresh interest, as being strikingly like her niece; and he thought to himself that she must have been very beautiful when young. She was surely not old yet, and she was still more beautiful than Ruth was or could be; but she had so long laid aside any claim to beauty, or any

thought of it, that it might be considered non-existent. She had the sweet serious absent look of one who lives in the past; and if her past were a scanty one, and her regrets were rather for what she had never had than for what she had lost, there was no one left now to note the difference. She welcomed her guests very pleasantly, and said she believed that they were all there now. William Noyes was a little alarmed, as no lady but Miss Sarah Lewis had descended with her, but he was reassured by hearing Roland remark that all they had to do was to take up Ruth, and he would order the trap round. In a few moments they were all on it, and Roland was holding the reins of four very lively bay horses. His hands looked hardly large enough, but he drove with careless ease, as he did everything else. At rest, his classic beauty, though line by line it would match with some masterpiece of Greek art, looked effeminate, but the moment action called out the capabilities of face and form, the criticism could no longer apply. The coach and horses were Charley Binney's, but Charley could not drive, and took the middle seat, behind Roland and Miss Lewis, as a matter of course. As a matter of course, too, the seat by him was left vacant, and the two other young men were assigned to places on each side of Mrs. Binney. There

was just time enough for the team to get up their speed before they were pulled up so suddenly at the door of the Wentworth house as to create some sensation in quiet North-end Street.

The Wentworth house was of very old red brick, and there was a great flight of steps up to the front door, with a porch resting on groups of white columns, and a lantern swung across on an arch of wrought iron, the whole just deep enough to give room for a long bed of white and yellow tulips under the windows, behind a wrought-iron railing. It was in much the same style as the Binney house, but though that had been renovated with excellent taste, and all that money could do, the Wentworth house held its superiority of greater original massiveness and splendor, perhaps the more because no fineries of modern antiquity had displaced the associations which the wear of generations had given.

The guard descended, and rang at the door, but no one came.

"How perfectly sweet and lovely this house is! I never saw anything so charming!" cried Miss Lewis.

"*You* never did, certainly," said Roland, with a meaning glance of admiration in his fine dark gray eyes, while he slackened his grasp of the impatient horses.

"Roland! how can you?" said the young lady, blushing.

"I suppose we look rather picturesque ourselves."

"Oh, yes—there is nothing so picturesque as a coach."

"Much in the style of a Christmas card."

"Yes, indeed! a real lovely Christmas card! I had a sweet calendar last Christmas, with a picture so like this dear old house, and a coach in front of it; I have kept it so carefully! I wonder who could have sent it!"

"He is a fortunate fellow indeed to have pleased you for a moment," sighed Roland, with another telling look. "Hang it, why does n't she hurry up!" he thought to himself, while Miss Lewis blushed again, and the real sender of the card, Mr. Charles Binney, opened his eyes, and then exploded in a laugh; but as he was in the habit of laughing, no one noticed it, and Miss Lewis continued, with an innocent air, "it must be delicious to live in such a home!"

"It might be delicious to me—with you," said Roland, turning a yawn into a sigh.

Mrs. Binney could not hear what they were saying, but she was not pleased with their attitude. "I wonder," she interposed, "that dear Ruth does not come. Did you tell her we should be sure to call at half-past three, Roland?"

"I did indeed, dearest tantine, and therefore, from my knowledge of her ways I surmise that she has just begun to put on her hat, in which case she is good for another quarter of an hour. She always stands that length of time taking a survey before she puts in the last pin. But if you wish, Noyes shall knock her up for you. Jump off, William, my boy, and give a thundering rat-tat upon the lion's head."

"Surely," said William, pausing on the doorstep, though he had clambered down with sufficient alacrity, "there can be no reason for hurrying Miss Wentworth."

"That shows how little you know her. Give a knock, for they don't mind ringing. Knock, and it 'll make her get her hat on one-sided; she hates that worse than anything."

The very modest knock given by Mr. Noyes to the old-fashioned brass knocker called up a pretty, languid-looking parlor-maid, who murmured something indistinct about Miss Ruth being down directly, and vanished, while Sarah Lewis was declaring that dearest Ruth could not fail to look most lovely, no matter how her hat was put on.

"Ruth is a good girl," said Roland, "but she has no consideration for the feelings of horses; now you—" he added, with another tender look at his fair neighbor. His further words, if he had any, were drowned in Charley Bin-

ney's "haw-haw!" but though Roland was sometimes at a loss for words, he never was for looks. "I wish," he thought to himself, "Ruth would show a little consideration for me. A man can never tell what he may be driven to say to fill up the time when he 's kept waiting beyond all reckoning"; and then, aloud, "Ah, here she comes!"

The door swung open wide, and showed a long vista of wide wainscoted hall, and great staircase at the back, under which another open door led by a vine-covered trellised porch into the old formal garden, with its overflowing box-edged beds, all caught in one glimpse as background to a slender figure clad in soft, spotless, flowing white. Her dress, in its exquisite simplicity, looked as innocent of art as any lily in the garden; but her dressmaker had complacently pronounced it "an Empire gown, just Miss Wentworth's style."

"How do you do, Mr. Noyes?" she said, as she quietly buttoned the last button of her long white wash-leather gloves; "it is a lovely day, is it not?" William had expected to hear her make some slight expression of regret for having kept all the rest waiting; but she did not appear to recognize the necessity for it. No one had ever shown her that he minded waiting for her; and the present party were her slaves. The men were all more or less in love with her,

Roland, in his way, quite as much as any of them. Miss Lewis flattered her, and her aunt petted her without stint. If not the dearest thing in the world to Mrs. Binney, she was at least the one that gave her most pleasure. Mrs. Binney idolized her son, her only child, born after his father's death, but it was with a love that brought with it more than love's fair share of fears and doubts. She loved Roland, as every woman, from his great-grandmother down, must; but there was a pain here too, almost more than a mother's heart could bear, in seeing him side by side with her own boy, but a week his junior. But Ruth was nothing but a joy, recalling to the aunt herself and her darling twin sister in their childhood—which most, she could not tell; and later days, when she in her deep widow's weeds had sat by that sister's white shadowy form, propped on pillows, and held the laughing, dancing baby high up to catch the poor mother's weakening gaze.

As the girl lightly ascended to the place reserved for her by her cousin's side, Mrs. Binney gave her one fond proud look, and then turning to William, who, after having the honor of helping Miss Wentworth up, had resumed his former place, lamented the unevenness of the party. "We should have had another lady," and then to Ned Robbins, "I am so very sorry dear Rosie could not come."

Dear Rosie's regrets were again detailed by her brother, and Mrs. Binney went on to tell how she had sent to one and another young friend who could not come that afternoon. All said they were sorry, but nobody felt so, for that or anything, while the heaven laughed above and the earth laughed below, and the coach swept like a flying cloud through the spring breezes along Bridge Street.

"Who is that?" asked Ned Robbins, who, leaning forward, was engaged in lively conversation with Miss Wentworth, her cousin being seemingly quite satisfied to listen. A tall, handsome girl on the sidewalk bowed very slightly, and every man's hat was off in a moment, Roland's with special emphasis.

"I do not know her," replied Miss Wentworth, looking straight before her.

"Oh, it 's that horrid Chapman girl!" cried Miss Lewis, giggling.

"Sarah, my dear!" said Mrs. Binney, reprovingly.

"Well, but, Cousin Harriet, they really are horrid, are they not?" asked Miss Lewis, alarmed. "Why, the mother is a medium, or a fortune-teller, or something of the kind, is n't she, Roland?"

"Bless you!" thought Roland, "how I should enjoy wringing the nasty little neck of you!" but he only gave her another tender

look, with some nonsense about his destiny being forever fixed beyond the power of fortune-teller to predict. Whether he meant a woman good or ill, he had but one way of showing it.

Miss Lewis feared she had offended propriety and Mrs. Binney, and if she had but vague ideas of the first-named power, she had a very distinct one of the other. She and all the rest were glad to change the subject, and every one said something but William, who was still gazing at the faint Mayflower-like flush that was dying away on the dainty little ear and quarter-line of cheek that were all Miss Wentworth showed him.

V

FLOWER AND THORN.

"THAT horrid Chapman girl" had no added flush on her already fresh rosy cheeks as she went on her way, though it was a warm day, and she was walking fast. She turned into a street of wavering respectability, where the cheap frame houses, mostly new, were huddled close to each other and the street, the fenceless strips of trodden earth in front only relieved by an occasional scrubby lilac or syringa. Here and there some dressmaker, or old maid with a little income, had kept her fence up, and her flowers in bloom, but these were the exceptions; and already foreigners had set foot here and there, heralds of further disorder and decay.

The house before which the girl paused was one of the least attractive, set in a box-like "block," its featureless front flush with the sidewalk, and without dividing line of any kind to distinguish it from its neighbors. It was,

however, marked by a large tin plate on one side of the door, bearing the inscription:

DR. C. KITTIE VAN WINKLE

Mental Healer and Test Medium

Inside was a narrow passage, hardly wider than the front door, lighted only by a small fanlight above, but which held, with some squeezing, a row of chairs, on which Dr. C. Kittie Van Winkle's patients were wont to repose themselves during her office hours, till summoned in succession to a colloquy in a little dark middle room, which was lighted and heated from the parlor or the kitchen, as was most convenient, and where the heads of the family spent the night in a folding bed. Strange as it may seem, a place here was somewhat in demand, and many poor creatures came by whom a long wait on these high narrow seats was patiently borne, as a step toward relief from pain or sorrow. It is to be hoped they left their cares behind them, for they left very little else. Dr. Van Winkle was wont to talk of her past grandeur, but it had gone by before she ever came to Bethel, and the only relic of it she possessed was her surname, borne by one of several husbands, and retained by her as euphonious and attractive, her present piece of masculine property rejoicing in that of

Smutt, which was by no means calculated to cut a figure on a sign. He kept it, however, as an appellation for family use, and it is even rumored that an occasional bill, the only species of letter he ever received, would come addressed to "Smutt Van Winkle."

It was currently reported among Mrs. Smutt Van Winkle's present neighbors, that her past prosperity had been due to practices more or less shady; but however that may be, it was generally allowed that at present she was guilty of nothing more than a little mild quackery; and who can say that the recognized half of the medical profession is wholly free from that? Also, while the number of her husbands, and the impossibility that they could all have been fairly got rid of, were never-ending subjects of speculation among Mrs. Wickwire the dressmaker, and Mrs. Tolman, the widow who eked out her income by taking in plain sewing, and their set in the neighborhood, they were unanimous in their belief that she was now lawfully Mrs. Smutt. Every one of them knew, and when not exasperated by her laxities as a neighbor—the worst of which was the freedom with which the little Smutts and Van Winkles, and other small boys whose surnames were not on record, were allowed to trespass on the adjacent premises—were not slow to acknowledge that if her life were now not at least technically

correct, Bertha Chapman, her only child by her first, lawfully married, and properly deceased husband, would not have stayed under her roof a moment.

As Bertha now entered the house, the last of the day's patients, a shabby genteel woman with an indefinite "complaint" paused and looked, as the patients were wont to look, with some curiosity and a little awe at the doctor's tall handsome well-dressed daughter. Bertha nodded to her kindly, and for a moment a pleasant smile dispersed the gravity which usually made the girl's blooming face look older than it really was. The smile faded as she crossed the threshold, and met her mother at the door.

Mrs. Van Winkle—for I will not brave the wrath of the medical fraternity of Wessex County by calling her "Doctor," was a tall woman, and, though growing stout, carried off her height easily enough. Her well-shaped head and straight nose were like her daughter's, and contributed to impose respect on her patients; but her eyes were light and wandering, her brows and lashes scanty, and her long thin lips had fine diverging lines about their drawn-in corners. Her hair, if it were not a wig, was a very good imitation of one, grizzled less by white hairs than by a general pervading dustiness, which showed dark and grimy on her skin.

"Met her, did you?" she asked in a somewhat deprecating tone of her daughter.

"Yes; I did n't know as she came now," answered Bertha, dryly.

"Why, yes; she will come, you know! I could n't stop her, not if I tried;" then with a hasty glance at the girl's face, "how d' you think she looks?"

"She 's giving her money for nothing!" replied Bertha, who had meanwhile hung up her hat, and taking an apron from a chair and tying it on, begun to range the dishes on the table.

"Well!" said Mrs. Van Winkle; "if she feels it 's doing her good—that 's the main thing, you know; but now really, Bertie, what d' you think of her? I mean, think she 's going to get well or not?"

"How can I tell? I don't know about these things, and you say you do."

"Well, fact is, I can't quite make out. Her spirit effluences don't rise up over her head, nor yet hang down; they stick out straight, and when that 's the case you ain't certain, and I give 'em the benefit of the doubt. I tell her she 's better, and that 's something; and after all, I don't believe no one else could do any more for her than I do, nor as much."

"I don't know," said Bertha, incautiously, "but perhaps I could do her good."

"Ah, if you only would! If you would take

hold of the business, Bertie, I believe you 'd be the making of it! You 've got an eye for disease I never saw the like of—never! Now can't you think of something for Mrs. Demmon to take? If you will, I 'll tell her I 've been holding a consultation on her case; and I won't charge her anything extra for it, neither."

"As if I would advise her to take anything! That 's not the way I 'd do her good; and you need n't think my practice would ever bring in any money; quite the contrary. There—the table 's set; if you 'll get supper, I 'll call the boys and wash their faces."

Mrs. Van Winkle proceeded to the back kitchen, a little den of a lean-to, behind the house, where all the real work was done, though the titular kitchen was fitted up therefor with a large sink in the corner, by which hung a roller towel. Bertha opened the front door, and having called the boys in a voice which could be heard the length of the street, and with an accent which admitted of no delay in answering the summons, rolled up her sleeves, and proceeded to a summary and thorough washing of all of them. She was quick, but tender, and gave each damp face a kiss as she wiped it off, and the boys, their jackets brushed by the same energetic hand, took their places at the table as clean as anything could be in that house, where dirt seemed

to cling to everything but Bertha, and to concentrate itself on the small person of Mr. Smutt, who sat down in shirt-sleeves, the condition of which might have materially interfered with some young ladies' appetites. It in no way affected Bertha's hearty partaking of an abundant meal, by no means badly cooked by Mrs. Van Winkle herself, with the assistance of a poor little waif, called an adopted daughter, shifted off on her by some unhappy patient who had found the surest way of escape from life's cares and miseries. As for Bertha, she "tended" in one of the largest of the Bethel emporiums, where a little of everything was sold, following the revival of the ancient village store idea by the city traders. She related one or two little incidents of her day there, but for the most part sat silent, while the conversation ran on among the rest of the family on their own "business and desires."

Mr. Smutt had a business as well as his wife. It might be hard to say what it was, but it now and then brought in a little money. None of the boys had reached the period of steady wage earning; but Bertha paid her board and gave, though often under protest, her aid on extra occasions, and, with an intermittent boarder or lodger, the household contrived to exist, and even to enjoy its pleasures. Mr.

and Mrs. Van Winkle went to lectures, and circles, and visited Boston now and then. Bertha did not appear much in their society, having pleasures of her own more incident to her age. Mrs. Van Winkle troubled herself not at all about her daughter's duties or amusements, and only very slightly about her future. What could a girl want who had as many "beaux" as Bertha could always command? She had only to choose among them at any time she pleased; and if she chose wrong, as there seemed every prospect of her doing, her mother would remark that Bertha must follow her own leadings.

"S'pose he 'll come to-night?" she remarked interrogatively, as they rose from the table.

"No," replied Bertha, "I don't think he will. I met them all, on Charley Binney's coach, going to the Myopia, I guess."

"Yes, now the weather 's fine, they 'll be going all the time. That Lewis girl was along too, most likely?"

"Yes."

"You better look out," said Mrs. Van Winkle. But Bertha, as she went on clearing the table, putting some dishes in a cupboard and heaping others on a tray with a rapidity the eye could hardly follow, would not even deign a superior smile.

"Seems to me you might make Roland get

the coach some day—Charley Binney 'd lend it any time—and take you out."

"I don't want to. Come, Net, let 's see your hat," said Bertha, turning to the little maid of all work; "did you take off the ribbon and sponge it with the cold tea I left out? and press it? and black the hat with my shoe-blacking?"

"Every bit of it!" cried Net, eagerly, running off to bring the hat. Bertha established herself by the window in the front parlor, to pursue her work by the late twilight of the lovely spring evening. The small room was, as is the wont of such parlors, the most uninviting room in the house, but this evening it was crowded in every corner with splendid hot-house flowers, which, though past their first freshness, still breathed ease and luxury.

Bertha's taste in dress was unerring. She knew what was beautiful, becoming, or fashionable, and could hit the proper balance among the three for herself or any one else. She herself never wore any but the very best material made in the very best manner; but, unfortunately, her taste inclined to the gorgeous, which, indeed, was what her beauty demanded; and the rich color and stately though simple sweep and roll of the dark-blue satine gown, and dark-blue straw hat, with vivid scarlet flashing through wherever slashing or lining

gave it an apparently unpremeditated chance, though they would have looked quite in place on top of the Binney coach, added to the ill-repute of the "horrid Chapman girl" on the dusty sidewalk. But Bertha had made up her mind on various points, and one was that she would never efface any iota of her own good looks, though her pretty clothes were often more painful to her than the anchorite's hair shirt to him. She trimmed poor little weak-eyed, sandy-haired Net's Sunday hat in very quiet and modest style; and when she set it on as Net stood before the glass, and gave it a final twist or two, the face beneath looked almost pretty.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Bertie!" cried the girl. She could say no more, but her gratitude overflowed in a kiss on the warm cheek which Bertha bent down to her from her stately height.

"There, now, keep it nice," she said; "why, you look real well this spring, Net!" Her tone was blithe, but the look she sent after Net, as the child ran off singing, was a sober one. She was, as her mother had said, an adept in mental healing; but, oh! she thought, rather impatiently, what an easy case Net's was! But as a springing step came fast up the doorsteps she beamed all over with smiles.

"Hullo, Bertie!" cried the newcomer.

"Hullo, Roland!" responded the girl, as he came in. She cautiously drew down the window-shades before she turned, and they kissed each other fondly, and more than once.

"I thought you would n't come to-night—I thought you 'd gone to the Myopia," she said, as he threw himself down on the creaking old haircloth-covered sofa, and drew her down by his side.

"No, we only drove to Beverly Farms and back to supper at my aunt's; but there was one man too many anyhow, and I begged off. I was sick of making love to Sarah Lewis, with her pinched-up waist and her false hair, and her sweets and dears. I left her to play second fiddle by herself, for all the other men were in love with my sister, and I came here to get a little peace and quiet."

"Well, have it, then, you poor dear boy," said Bertha, with a caressing touch on his dark hair.

"And she has the impudence to call you 'that horrid Chapman girl!' If I don't pay her off some time for that, it will only be by the special interposition of Providence in her behalf; and I don't believe Providence will think her worth taking the trouble to interpose for."

"I would n't take the trouble to pay her off, then," said Bertha, laughing. "Why, I could call her 'that horrid Lewis girl' if I thought it

worth my while to be as silly as she is. So the other men were all your sister's beaux, were they? I did n't know William Noyes was sweet upon her. I did n't know as she knew him at all."

"He only met her the other day. I 've always known Bill Noyes myself, but of course he was never in the way of meeting Ruth. He came across her coming up to town on Wednesday, and as she had missed her escort he took her to the hall—the sort of thing that happens in a magazine story. It was quite enough to smash Bill. Ruth 's just the sort of girl to fall in love with at first sight. Why, I 've been in love with her myself! One evening when she 'd just come back from abroad, and I saw her at the Thayers' all of a sudden in a stunning new gown, I quite forgot she was my sister, until she asked me to take her home. It was an awful blow to me, and lasted some hours. It is n't that she 's such a beauty; why, you 're handsomer than she is; but she always looks as if she were made of porcelain, and the other girls of clay."

"She did look real sweet this evening. I never saw her look so pretty."

"Yes—I 'm always so good-natured, you know. I asked Bill to come along this afternoon, and introduced him to my aunt. If he wants to fall in love with Ruth, it is very

natural, and his being on fighting terms with father only adds a charm to the situation. I 've no objection."

"Mr. Noyes is one of the nicest young men I know. He 's always as polite to me as if I were a queen, though since we 've grown up we never meet except he comes in to buy something. He 'd make a splendid husband for any girl, only I should think, after all that 's been said between him and your father, 't would be rather awkward for them."

"Oh, Ruth would n't dream of marrying him! I can tell you, she 'll look higher than that! She 'll marry Charley, of course, when she 's ready. Poor old Charley, you can't expect a girl to swallow him very easy. She must have her fling in society first, being a beauty, and so on."

"I don't believe she 'll ever marry him."

"Oh, yes, she will! You can bet on that. Ruth 's full of romance and sentiment and such stuff, and she thinks it a fine thing to run across Bill in this way, and she 'll think of him the more, because, as Puff says, he 's the last man in the world she ought to fall in love with. But she won't fall in love. She 's not the kind to go beyond a certain point unless she 's dragged or driven, and I don't think he 's the kind to do that. She 'll marry Charley; my aunt has mapped it all out for years past."

"I don't believe she ever will."

"She must; and I only wish my aunt would make things go a little faster. Ruth 's never in a hurry, and in this case you can't blame her, but I wish she 'd think a little more of me and my affairs. When she 's married to Charley, he 'll have to do something for me."

"I 'd rather you 'd do something for yourself."

"That 's all very well to talk about, but where 's the use of it? I can't go in with my father; there 'd be a row in no time. You might as well talk of going in with your mother; and father would never take any pains to push me in anything else. I 'll tell you, Bertie, if you 'd like to have me go on the stage there 'd be an opening. I 'll engage to cut out every *jeune première* in the country in a month."

"Oh, the theatricals! They went off splendid, I know."

"Yes, there was wild enthusiasm; I see you 've still the flowers I sent you; about a tenth part of them, I should think. I can tell you, you missed it, not seeing me; but then, perhaps, you would n't have liked it."

"You 've had to shave off your moustache," said Bertha, regretfully, as she raised her cheek to his lips.

"Had to be done, my dear. But I 've had a lot of photographs taken in my costumes,

and you shall have the proofs as soon as I get 'em. There was no end to the amount of trouble getting up the rig. Mrs. Tom Silloway dressed me, and did pretty well as a lady's-maid; but she has no taste. Fancy her wanting me to put on a blonde wig! She harped upon it till I told her she might make herself look as meretricious as she pleased, but she should n't spoil me. I could n't get a thing to suit me till I hit upon a lucky idea, and took Ruth with me to the wigmaker's. 'You see Miss Wentworth's head?' I said to him. 'Very well, get mine up to look just like it;' and I will say for him he did very fairly."

"And did you copy after your sister in the rest of the part?"

"What, take Ruth for a Juliet? That would be a joke! She 's as cold as ice. There 's just that degree of family resemblance between us that makes it safe to take some points in costume; but as to the reading of the part, as they call it, I took it first hand from you."

"Roland!"

"Oh, perhaps I enlarged on the lines a little; that 's allowable on the stage; but really, it could n't be much improved. The men were all asking me how I could do a girl's part like that, and I told them I had studied it from the most charming young woman of my acquaintance."

"That was awfully mean of you. How do you know they won't put this and that together? They must know—that is, some of them."

"They all know about you, I imagine; and the women too, for that matter. Even Ruth has heard a plenty, though she purses up her little mouth, and pretends not to hear when you're mentioned. Mrs. Tom Silloway is wild to see you. She plagued me with her questions till I told her you were the most beautiful girl I had ever seen; something in her style, only twice as handsome as she *used* to be. That was what cut. Come, Bertie, my darling, don't be angry—you ought to be glad, for the sake of morality, that I 've quarrelled with Mrs. Tom."

Bertha breathed hard for a moment or two, while the peach-bloom on her cheek grew pale, and her black brows drew together with a look more fit for a Lady Macbeth than a Juliet; but she said nothing. Another of the points on which her mind was made up was, if ever she felt out of temper with Roland, never to show it. A show of anger might be a useful weapon at times, and make a piquant variety to love's endearments, but it must only be used when she was cool enough to wield it with judgment. She could not trust herself now, and after a moment she said, pouting and smiling, with

returning roses: "You 're a horrid plague! Come now, tell me all about your dresses, and what the others wore, and how they looked."

"Mrs. Tom Silloway was my nurse, and did the thing next best to me. She availed herself largely of the privileges the part allowed her, and it worked in very well. Rosie Robbins was my mamma; they chose her, I suppose, on account of her youth. Archie Perkins was Mercutio, chosen because Mercutio was a very witty young man, and Archie can never see a joke — his Scotch ancestry, I imagine. They wanted to give Charley some part, so they put him in as Peter, which he did most naturally; he broke most of the china at the Capulet ball. Romeo was Montie Stephens, chosen because he 's engaged, and they thought he 'd know how to make love—you never saw such a stick as he was at it till I showed him how."

Having launched on the subject, Roland went on till the night was far along, while Bertha, an eager listener, plied him with well-chosen questions, backed by the mute attention of her splendid dark-gray eyes. The later he stayed the better. Mrs. Binney, as Bertha well knew, never gave wine at her little suppers, recognizing the fact that a very little could turn her nephew's head, and determined that he should not receive it from her hand.

She could not prevent his getting it elsewhere, but Bertha would make the attempt, and not always unsuccessfully. If he stayed till he was tired and sleepy, the chances were that he would go straight home and to bed, and she spared no pains to make him do so, regardless of any disparaging comments her neighbors might make if, roused by accident, they saw her light still burning. This evening flattery and interest did their work, and when he left her, well on in the small hours, after many a farewell of half-spoken tender words, and lingering fond embraces, and she ran up to her own window on the second floor, and, leaning out into the warm spring night, listened to his footsteps down the street, they went so far in the right direction that to Bertha, with all her soul in her ears, it really seemed as if she could hear them all through the slumbering city to the very threshold of the Wentworth house; and she lay down on her small cot by the youngest of the children, ready to enjoy the three hours' sleep which was all that was left for her.

VI

AN INTERLUDE

THE supper at Mrs. Binney's had gone off pleasantly enough for most of the party, even though Roland's defection had robbed it of some life. His sister was charming, and her admirers still at the stage when they would rather gaze at her in company than be alone with her. Miss Lewis, in Roland's absence, found her host's attentions to her, or rather hers to him, agreeable. Mrs. Binney, alone, was somewhat ill at ease; she was unvaryingly calm and courteous, and no quieter than she always was; but she drew a long breath of relief when the men were smoking in the garden, and, Miss Lewis having gone, she and her niece were free to sit down together for a confidential chat on a wide low sofa before a great stand of hyacinths.

"Confidential" is perhaps a misnomer, for Mrs. Binney rarely confided in any one. Her chief anxieties were hardly acknowledged even to herself, certainly not to a young girl like Ruth; and fond as they were of each other,

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their talk generally glided over the surface of things.

"I wish," began the elder lady, "that dear Roland could have stayed."

"Yes—I wish so too," said Ruth, with no special emphasis. She had a vague fear that dear Roland was a little "wild," but she supposed it was a tendency he would probably "outgrow," as young men of good family usually did, and of what the word involved in her brother's case she knew as little as a caged canary bird does of the ways of vultures. She had heard of Bertha Chapman, and conjectured that she might be "vulgar," a word which represented to her the last depths of degradation, and for which "eccentric" was substituted in characterizing persons of her own class. "Perhaps he would have stayed if Rosie had come," she continued.

"Yes," said Mrs. Binney, "Rosie is such a sweet, refined girl, so quiet and ladylike. She is quite worn out, she writes, with the exertion and alarm of acting. I wonder her grandmamma consented, but I think she must see her mistake now. I did not regret it so much, however, because I would so much rather have had her with Roland and Charley than any one else. If she had not taken the part, Sarah Lewis told me it was to have been offered to her, and I should not have liked that. I do

not like to have Roland pay so much attention to her. I am sorry to hint at such a thing, but there is something about Sarah—well, not quite like the rest of her family."

"Sarah is sometimes a little odd. But I really don't think Roland cares seriously for her, or Charley either."

"Charley! oh, no, indeed! He likes to laugh and talk with her; young men do with a lively girl; but Charley has a very lofty ideal of womanly excellence."

"He has his darling mother to give him one," said Ruth, putting up her pretty lips to kiss her aunt, who gave her in return a warm caress.

"Ned Robbins is a very agreeable young man—he reminds me so much of his poor father," she said.

"Yes, he 's very pleasant."

"And that Mr. Noyes seems a very gentlemanly person. How did he happen to come this afternoon?"

"Roland asked him, I suppose. We met him at the theatricals, and afterwards at Mrs. Burgess's."

"Ah, then it is all right, of course! Has he ever been at your house?"

"No—papa and he had some lawsuit, I believe."

"Ah, that, indeed! Roland, I know, makes

a point of ignoring such things, and I dare say he is right. And this is a little different from his coming to your own house."

"I really think I ought to go now," said Ruth, suddenly.

"Well, dear, I know you don't like to keep poor Hannah up late, but can't I send round word that you will stay here to-night?"

"I think I had better not, thank you. There are several things I want to see to, to-morrow early. It is book-club day, you know."

"Well, then, Charley shall see you home. You 'll drive with me to-morrow afternoon, will you not? I am going over to the Bradstreets'. Charley is going to Boston, and if you want anything there, you need only let him know."

Of course, Charley was delighted to see his fair cousin home; and what was more natural than that William Noyes, whose road lay the same way, should take his leave at the same time, and stroll along with them? He left them at the Wentworth house door, neither hurrying nor lingering. No man should say that he was afraid to meet its master, nor yet that he put himself in his way. He went home, and before he went to bed, he had softened down some passages in a newspaper article regarding a transaction in which Mr. Wentworth was involved, though in respect to matters of fact he let it stay unaltered.

VII

LUCIDA SIDERA

HARRIET and Fanny Halstead had been the beauties of Bethel, some thirty years ago; and not of Bethel only, but of their whole connection and circle in Boston, and all its social dependencies of New England. There were not wanting those who said, as it was said of the Gunnings before them, that it was greatly owing to their being two of them; but a youthful admirer put the thing more prettily in a little copy of verses, to the effect that Nature wished this once to show that she could if she would repeat her fairest work. They were lovely enough to have won even more renown than they did, but fortune was as adverse as nature was beneficent. Their girlhood coincided with the very ugliest costumes ever invented; and they were forced to leave record of themselves to posterity in big, ill-shaped hoops, and lumpy chignons, pitilessly brought out by the severe photographs of their time. Even Mrs. Binney's portrait, painted after her marriage, is

deformed by these monstrosities, though the pathetic charm of her pictured smile from the wall goes far to endear them to the gazer's eye. The day had not yet come in their world for a beauty's empire to be extended by the press, which, indeed, was full of other matters then than muse or grace. The black mouths of death were grinning on a hundred heights, and knights and squires were crowding to the front ranks of iron war. When the twin sisters' twentieth birthday should have been ushered in with all due delights of music and dance, the men who should have won their hearts were lying stark and stiff on Gettysburg field, and they were deepening the mourning that they wore for an only brother already fallen in the ranks, for a father still in the prime of manhood, who fell on that tremendous day. Perhaps these acknowledged griefs were sharpened by one which the sisters did not breathe even to each other. "Nothing definite" had passed in either case; nothing but a few looks that might have been misread; a lingering tone, that might have been fancied, in the good-bye. No trace was left but a faint yet lasting shadow on the fair girlish faces.

Harriet was the elder; if but half an hour in time, a year at least in character and feeling, and her regrets struck deepest. She might not know that she had loved; but she knew

that she never could love; and in two years she married Charles Binney, an elderly millionaire, who made her a very kind, indulgent husband, and who seemed well satisfied with the quiet companionship of her gentle presence, almost lost among the splendors of the home he had decked out for her. In two years more she was left a widow, hourly expecting her child's birth, and all the lonelier because her sister, who had married less than a year after her, was in the same situation and could not be with her.

Fanny Halstead's remembrances of her early maiden dreams were a shade less tangible, and she was universally supposed to have married for love. For what else could it be? Ralph Wentworth was only twelve years older than she, and in his youth not ill-looking, and very much in love, or at least very determined to have her. He was not, to put it mildly, considered a very pleasant young man; but it was not likely he would show his temper to Fanny, and he was a Wentworth, and, on the whole, as good a match as any going in her set at that time, and then the female taste is often so odd! No one blamed her, though her sister was frequently condemned as mercenary; the fact being that Harriet's marriage was productive of a good deal of happiness in a quiet way, while Fanny's was the entrance to a hell on

earth. Who can tell in how many ways a man of vicious temper, low tastes, and coarse fibre, can torture a delicate and refined wife, who feels the strain of *noblesse oblige* too strongly to run away from him, or even to complain of him? It took five years to kill Fanny Wentworth. The birth of her second child made a proper excuse for slipping out of the world, and a welcome one, had it not been for the thought of the two helpless creatures whom she left to her sister's care, so far as the memory of insults on the one hand and slights on the other could allow the father and aunt to act in harmony. The crowning slight, in Ralph Wentworth's estimation, was that he had not been made executor of his brother-in-law's will; but Mr. Binney knew better, and chose James Halstead, an uncle of his wife. Mrs. Binney was left sole personal guardian of her child, with an ample provision; she had means to be generous to her sister's children, and she was so. If there was ever the least pause in her anxious motherly tenderness to them, it was when she most keenly felt that they might yet be her nearest earthly care; and when her fears for her own boy were for a season lulled to rest, it would revive with double and treble fervor.

It was very uncertain for some years of his early childhood whether Charley Binney would live to grow up, and the silence of all his rela-

tions struck home with added force the mother's agonizing doubts as to whether it were well for him that he should. But Charley grew to man's estate and learned, though with some difficulty, to read and write and cast accounts, and at one-and-twenty his trustee made no objection to resigning to him the control of his property, assuring his mother that Charley had sense enough where money matters were concerned. "He could never have made a living," soliloquized the old gentleman; "he could n't handle a spade or drive a nail straight; why, he can hardly carry his spoon straight to his mouth; but he 'll keep what he 's got, and if Harriet can only get him a good wife and keep him away from Roland he 'll do very well. Poor Harriet! well, well, Binney was always kind to her, at any rate."

Mrs. Binney indignantly repelled the idea of keeping her son and nephew apart. Was not Roland her own just as much as Charley? The boys grew up together and should have gone through college together, only Charley could never get in and Roland could never stay in. Roland, beautiful as Adonis, clever in a hundred ways, used all his cousin's possessions with careless ease, and Charley, slow and awkward, looked on with admiration in which there was never a trace of envy, any more than there was of scorn in Roland's "poor old Charley."

Surely, thought Mrs. Binney, such a friendship could hurt neither, and then it gave all the more chance for the accomplishment of her wishes as to her son's marriage, which she knew, as well as her uncle, would be the turning-point in his life. She would not allow herself to fear that her Charley could become the prey of any low adventuress. She hoped his sense in matters of business might extend to this, and she trusted, and with reason, to Roland's protection. Roland, she felt, was likely to be more careful for Charley than he was for himself; and, indeed, the fact was that he had more than once spoiled the chances of such huntresses after the bigger game by interposing his own irresistible self, out of whom nothing was to be had in the way of damages. But, of course, a lady like Mrs. Binney could not descend to these disgusting details. Her more openly indulged fears were of some heartless, scheming, mercenary girl in her own rank; for how could her poor boy ever attract any other? unless, indeed—and here she had staked all her earthly hopes—unless the sisterly affection of habit, and unimpassioned sweetness of temper, and love and gratitude for his mother, and a little, a very little, harmless liking of the more refined luxuries of this world, could be so fostered as to take the place of love in his pretty cousin's heart? What a thing it would

be for him! And—for she did not want to be selfish—if Ruth could do it, willingly and innocently, what a thing it would be for Ruth!

Mrs. Binney's hopes were not altogether unreasonable. She knew Ruth well, and all the better that Ruth was so like herself. It had not been very difficult for her to marry to please other people, and though, as she well knew, the cases were somewhat different, yet, in fact, there was a time when the girl could have married her cousin without repugnance. His personal defects had become indifferent to her by habit. She was cold by nature and slow of growth. The physical aspect of marriage had not so much as dawned upon her imagination. She felt none of the horror of such a destiny that Bertha had felt for her. She liked her cousin and respected him. From infancy she had known him kind, if tactless; just, if slow; and true through and through. In how many a childish scrape did she not remember the brilliant Roland running away, or extricating himself by a ready falsehood, when awkward, blundering Charley had stood manfully up, and, with twitching face and stammering tongue, told the truth when it went against him, or, what was harder still to bear, against Roland. Then she had a strong sense of duty, of which a husband, once a husband, would have the full benefit.

But granted all this, the man who was to marry her must make some decent pretence of love-making. With this few young women can dispense, and Ruth least of all. Poor Charley loved his cousin tenderly, and would have been most willing to have married her at any moment, but courtship was beyond his powers.

Had Mrs. Binney been a different sort of woman, she could easily have managed the thing. She had but to inform the young people that they were engaged, tell Charley the day must be fixed, and Ruth that they must begin on the trousseau at once, and they would probably have fallen into the matrimonial line without demur. And this was just what Mrs. Binney could not bring herself to do. Like St. Pierre's Virginia, she would rather have died than had her life saved in an improper manner. She must wait, even though her hopes grew faint with waiting; for, doubly well guarded as was Ruth by nature and grace, how impossible that some other man should not step in to woo and win her!

Mrs. Binney watched her niece well, but here, too, *noblesse oblige*, and she would not allow herself to throw any obstacles in the way of her knowing any young man whom she considered worthy of the honor; and if these were not many, Ruth was all the more likely to fancy one of them. She had no particular ap-

prehension from William Noyes, the grandson of old Jacob Noyes, who had fitted her mother's shoes when that lady was a child; but there was something about the young man's clear brow and fearless yet modest bearing which roused an instinctive sense of danger. She felt very strongly that it was not fitting that a declared opponent of her brother-in-law should be invited to her house, but it was too late to stop it, and she said nothing, as usual. As for Ruth, she was not wont to notice a young man's looks in passing; but if a young lady is accustomed to hear a young gentleman spoken of as if he were a poisonous reptile, it is likely that he will be as effectually forced upon her attention as he could be in any way; and if he happen to be well-favored and well-spoken, these qualities will doubtless show to full advantage.

VIII

MANNINGHAMS AT HOME

"MANNINGHAM BROTHERS," the principal dry- and fancy-goods dealers of Bethel, conducted their business in genuine Bethel fashion, in a rambling shop of irregular construction, made by throwing two old houses on Wessex Street into one. But money had been made, and was still made, though in less proportion, behind that unpretentious exterior, while prudent investments of daily gains had made the Manninghams fairly wealthy men. They none the less extended that careful personal supervision over every detail of business which had been one chief factor of their success, and Joseph or Peter Manningham was always to be found early at the "store," turn and turn about. It was Peter's turn the morning after Mrs. Binney's coaching party, and Joseph could linger, as he was wont to do in his mornings of leisure, to enjoy the society of Mrs. Joseph, and improve the opportunity of discussing his domestic affairs in private. He

was a handsome man, just turning the corner from middle age, with a florid face and white hair, fastidiously nice in his dress and appointments, and with a very gentlemanly air and manner; qualifications for his trade which he did not fail to make the most of. His house was a pleasant one, with that solidity of structure which characterizes even a second-rate Bethel mansion; his dining-room was cosy and comfortable, and the breakfast a much better one than any Mrs. Binney was in the habit of offering to her friends. Mrs. Manningham kept a "girl"; she could well afford to keep more than one, but such a thing never entered her imagination. A house where the mistress did not superintend the cooking, and the daughters tidy up the rooms, would have been regarded by her with scorn. Her coffee was never left to cool while cook and kitchen-maid quarrelled or gossiped. Her dishes were never sent back to grow stale while waiting for late risers. Breakfast was on the table smoking hot at the stroke of the clock, and the family must be there to eat it; nor was any one but her husband when in confidential mood allowed to linger over the process. Five empty chairs now showed that four young Manninghams, beside their uncle, had partaken of the meal. The daughters were in the kitchen, one trimming the lamps, the other

cleaning the canary's cage, in the neatest manner; and they had a dozen other such jobs to do of a morning before one set out to teach needlework in the Public Schools, and the other sat down to designing cards for Prang & Company. Both the Miss Manninghams had had the best training money could buy at their respective "professions" as they called them, and both were sure of as much employment as they wanted. Their father was willing, indeed he was proud of them; and if he was meanwhile laying by a comfortable provision for each, and supplementing by liberal allowances what they earned by a few hours' light work each day, he was only doing what is expected of the tyrant man when he happens to be an American husband and father. He did it cheerfully, for his daughters, if a little spoiled, were still nice girls, and treated him with consideration, as one well fulfilling the duties of his inferior position. The younger boy was at school, and the older one had gone down to the store, where he had lately taken upon himself the duties of bookkeeper.

"So Joe 's getting along?" asked Mrs. Manningham. She was a slender, dark-haired woman, very carefully dressed, and looked like a lady. It was not till she spoke that the charm was broken, and she seemed to fall at once below her husband's level. Her inex-

pressive tones clashed on the ear like those of a machine, and every now and then there would come a hitch in the machinery, and it would give a sudden and discomposing squeak.

"Yes; as well, thus far, as I could expect," said Mr. Manningham, deliberately eating his omelette; "I laid out to give him some help in his work at first."

"It does seem as if you might have found something else for him!" sighed Mrs. Manningham, for the twentieth time that week; and for the twentieth time did Manningham, deliberately putting down his eyeglass, uncrossing his legs, and laying his paper on the table, reply in terms naturally suave, and polished by practice: "My dear, I thought this was the very best thing I could do;" and as the lady looked unconvinced: "I do not feel that I can trust Joseph at present under any one's eye but my own."

"I think 't would do just as well to send him off somewhere out of the way of them Fuller boys; at some school, to fit for college."

"I have tried him at school, and he did not make anything of it."

"There 's other schools than that, where they have things more lively. Military drill, or camping out in summer, or something of the sort would suit Joe."

"And then he would be just as likely to meet

other boys who would be as bad company for him as the Fullers—worse—for some of 'em would n't have their own living to get; and after all, Carry, I began this way myself."

"You? yes, but things were different then. You can afford to give your children a better education than you had. Of course you done very well and all that; but you know yourself it ain't the same thing now."

"Yes, my dear, I know that perfectly well. It is n't the same thing now to keep store it used to be. The Boston houses are crowding out the local ones farther and farther round every year. We 've got our name up and we keep it up; but I don't say that Joseph could do either, if he was ever so smart. But he don't show any taste for study; he has n't much taste for anything that I can see as yet; he 's got to work, and he 'll get no better chance than here. No one will have the patience with him that we will; and then, if he turns out fit for anything better, I won't spare the means to push him in it. It never matters how a man begins, so he does but get on; I would n't think of putting one of my girls into the store; but for a boy, it 's different."

"There 's things about it worse for him than for them, I guess," said Mrs. Manningham, with a snap of her sparkling black eyes, and a toss of her head; and as her husband did not

ask the reason of this demonstration, she was forced into an explanation: "Ain't you afraid to have him round with that Chapman girl?"

"Nonsense!"

"It 's very well to say that, but it 's no joke. She 's just the kind of girl to run after him."

"No such thing. Bertha Chapman 's not the kind of girl to run after nobody," said Mr. Manningham, growing warm, and forgetting his grammar, a point on which he ordinarily strove to be scrupulous.

"Well, to get him to run after her, then."

"I know better. She has too much sense. Why, Joe 's only a boy to her."

"He 'd be a mighty good catch for her, boy or no boy."

"My dear, you are entirely mistaken. Bertha knows how much she owes to me, and she is a good girl. I wish Joe had any chance of half as good a wife as she 'd make. I would n't stand in the way of it."

"Why, Mr. Manningham!"

"I mean it."

"But that family of hers! and that awful mother! If she 's a good girl, why does n't she show some ambition, and set up for herself."

"I don't believe things are as bad there as folks make out. If they were, she would n't stand it; but suppose she wanted to go, 't is n't

always easy for a young girl to set up for herself. We 've always made it a rule, you know, never to take on one that did n't live at home, and we never broke it yet. I might make an exception in some cases, if you would take her yourself, we 'll say;" and then answering his wife's expression of countenance: "Well, then don't blame the poor thing for sticking to her own people. She might do worse."

"She most likely will if she goes on. I 'm sure there 's talk enough on her own account, let alone her family; about her and Roland Wentworth. I really don't think you ought to go on keeping her."

"I don't know," said Mr. Manningham, a little confused; "I 've never had any words with Bertha on the subject. It don't interfere with her duties in the store, and I 've never had any good chance of beginning on it with her. It would be hard on her to turn her off, when she 's done nothing wrong that I know of, and I don't believe she ever will. And she would be a terrible loss to us, too. Why, she 'll sell half the stock while another girl is finding out that she has n't got what 's wanting."

"But she must know what he is; everybody does. I don't think she ought to mind your saying that she must n't keep company with him while she 's in your employment."

"If you know what he is, why did you let him be so attentive to Laura at the Church Fair? You seemed real pleased to have him hanging over her half the evening."

"I could n't help it without making a fuss. I hope my girls know how to make a man behave. Of course with them it 's different; he would n't dare say anything improper to them; but in Bertha Chapman's position—she must know what people would say. He would n't ever dream of marrying her."

"I don't know as he does dream of it; but I should n't be surprised if he did it. He 'll never get her in any other way."

"It would be very foolish in her to thrust herself upon a family like that!"

"I think it would. But girls are foolish about such things. It would be a great deal wiser in her to marry into our family. Don't be frightened, my dear, I 'm not thinking of Joe."

"Not Joe? Why — Joseph Manningham! You don't mean to tell me that your brother Peter is going to make a fool of himself at his time of life?"

"I don't know how much of a fool he would be, if Bertha will have him."

"At his age!" reiterated Mrs. Manningham, when she could speak.

"Poor old fellow! I 'm afraid he 's terribly

set on it. But I have n't the least idea she will, my dear, so don't climb the hill till you come to it."

"Oh, I wish—I do hope, she 'll marry Roland Wentworth! No one would wonder at anything he did; but your brother—what will they say?"

Mr. Manningham prudently declined to answer so comprehensive a question, and Mrs. Manningham, after an instant's pause, began afresh in a deprecating tone: "I am sure he can't have anything to complain of here—I 've tried and tried to make him comfortable." A sob broke her utterance.

"Yes, my dear—yes, I know you have. I am sure he thinks so too, only—good-bye, my dear, I must catch the nine o'clock; I 'm going to Boston to-day. Don't worry; I don't think there 's any reason you should. Good-bye!"

Manningham hurried off, having got over his conference with his wife much to his satisfaction. He had been watching his chance for some time to introduce to her mind the extraordinary and overpowering idea of a possible match between Mr. Peter Manningham and Miss Bertha Chapman. He was by no means so sure that it might not take place as he had represented himself to her; but he knew that if she were ever brought to acquiesce in the

arrangement, and acquiesce she must,—for no feminine spite must break the tie between Manningham Brothers,—it must be gradually, and to be so the idea must first dawn on her consciousness as an impossibility. For himself, he had no great objection. Peter had been a good brother and partner to him, and it was not for him to condemn Peter to eternal celibacy. There was nothing unnatural in his wanting to marry Bertha Chapman, and if not quite so natural, it would be very sensible in Bertha to want to marry Peter. She had a great deal of sense—for a girl—and if it were not for that young scamp of a Roland Wentworth—that so clever and so good a girl should care for a rascal like that—it was inexplicable! and then Manningham checked himself with the thought how little the cleverest girls know what a young man really is, and with how little reason the best fall in love.

Mrs. Manningham was left in a state of mind a good deal more perturbed. She was not a mercenary woman; she loved her brother-in-law for his own sake; and if the thought of the handsome property her children seemed likely to lose weighed something in her estimation, the ridicule the family and Peter himself would sustain by the spectacle of that model of a bachelor uncle to his pretty nieces falling in love with and marrying a girl younger than

the youngest of them, weighed more. Peter, whose notions of professional etiquette were so rigid, in love with one of the shop girls! There was something about it really improper—disgusting! It would make no end of misery for poor Peter himself. It would be so very unpleasant that Mrs. Manningham felt it must surely happen. She longed to go down to the store, and make observations with her own eyes; but she dared not. She might sometimes go there and make her purchases, like any other lady; but any loitering, or inspection, or conversation, beyond the barest civilities, with the other customers, was forbidden by a law absolute as those of the Medes and Persians. Obedient at home, Joseph Manningham, partly by Peter's reflected energy, was master in his shop.

IX

MANNINGHAMS AT WORK

BERTHA CHAPMAN, meanwhile, was busily engaged in her duties there. Manningham Brothers had experience enough in young women and their ways to know that they had found a treasure in her, and were not disposed to stint her in privileges; and, on her side, she was equally willing not to spare hard work. She had hoped to get the post of bookkeeper, and to sit apart in a glazed pen at the back of the shop, a little secluded from the public gaze, which, always irksome, had of late become oppressive; and she had, with scant assistance, taught herself how to keep the books, and was sure she could do it better than Joseph Manningham, junior, could; but her employers could not dispense with her talents as a saleswoman, and the bookkeeper's desk must be kept for young Joseph, an unsteady lad whom his friends were trying to sober. Bertha saw the reasonableness of their point of view, and served them with no less zeal and

aptness than before, heedless or no whether her duties consorted with the dignity of her place, next in rule to the partners themselves, and with two young assistants under her. She had just now finished setting things to rights with a quick vigorous hand, and was tying on a fresh spotless white apron over her plain black gown. She never wore anything in the shop but black of the simplest make, her brilliant costume of Saturday having been assumed on her weekly half-holiday, the privilege she valued most; but her dress had always something impressive about it, and the rich masses of her dark hair looked equally imposing with or without the black hat, that, like all her hats, was trimmed by herself with special adaptation to every fine point of form or color in her face. The bloom on her cheeks was bright enough to have vulgarized the effect of hair so dark and skin so white, had her eyes been black, instead of that deep gray, with long lashes that cast a solemn shadow far down into their very depths.

If Mrs. Joseph Manningham had carried out her wish of coming down to the store to watch over her brother-in-law's interests, she could hardly have discovered much. Peter Manningham was very like his brother, with his good looks made more of. His neatness had an added touch of precision, and his courteous manners to his lady customers had an extra

flavor of personal gallantry, which marked the old bachelor; but it was not displayed toward Bertha, and Bertha's demeanor toward him was perfectly unconscious. They were too busy, indeed, to exchange any more words than were absolutely necessary; all hands were fully occupied, for the day was fine, and the run of customers steady; but toward noon there came a slight lull in the rush; and when a remarkably handsome, well-dressed young man walked in, the younger saleswomen found time from their duties to look with as much curiosity as they dared show at Mr. Roland Wentworth, as he walked up to the counter, and stood without a word, deliberately surveying Bertha across it. She was silent, the rules of the establishment forbidding clerks to address customers till spoken to; and she stood waiting his pleasure, with downcast eyes, determined not to catch a glance from him if she could possibly help it.

"Have you any gloves?" he asked at last.

"Yes, sir. What kind?"

"Oh—dogskin, I suppose."

"What size?"

"I really don't know. Will you measure them, please?" He had taken a seat as he spoke, and now, leaning on the counter, reached one hand half across it, looking full in her face with an expression of keenly enjoying

the situation. Bertha, gravity itself, looked carelessly at his hand, and then, taking down a box of gloves, pushed them across to him, with, "I think you will find these the right size."

"They look too small. You had better measure them, if you don't mind."

Bertha took out a pair, and doubled them across the back of his hand with professional accuracy. She felt his breath warm against her cheek as she bent over her task, but her color never changed by one iota, and her hand was steady as a rock.

"These will do, I think," she said coolly.

"They are too light a shade," he drawled, looking at her rather large, but finely formed hands with lazy admiration.

"Here are a pair a shade darker."

"Which do you like best?"

"It is a matter of taste. We sell a good many of both."

"I am sure they are too small."

"I can stretch them for you in a moment," said Bertha, taking up a stretcher.

"If you would put them on yourself, that would be the best way. I am sure they would suit me, after you had worn them."

The scene had lasted sufficiently long to attract the attention of every one within hearing, and the lingering emphasis on the last words

was not lost. Bertha saw two lady customers exchange glances, and perceived that there was a general pause in all the surrounding transactions.

"I think," said she, coolly sweeping away all the gloves together, "we have another make which may fit you better;" and she walked clear around the shop to where Peter Manningham stood behind the opposite counter. "Mr. Manningham," she said distinctly, "I think you know where the parcel of Linder's gloves that came last week is. Will you kindly show them to this gentleman?"

One look from her eyes was enough for him, and in another moment, Roland found himself buying a pair of gloves from the master of the establishment, who, though courteous, was firm; while Bertha was absorbed in matching a large bundle of samples for a country customer. It was high time, for her fingers were trembling as she tied up the parcel, but no one noticed it but Mr. Manningham, who cast a quick glance her way, for Roland had walked off without another look at her, and as she could feel without seeing, somewhat out of humor.

"It was lucky," she thought, "that it was Peter who was here to-day. If it had been Joseph, I guess I should have had my walking ticket. It must n't happen again, that 's certain."

It was all very well to say this, but Bertha had no idea how she was to prevent it, if Roland chose to amuse himself in this sort of way. Not having been able to put her out of countenance was all the more reason why he should try it again. She did not, however, take any pains to plan what she should say to him when they next met, for there was no forecasting his moods. He did not come that evening, and on the next she was feeling a little uneasy, when there came a step at the door and a pull at the bell not at all like his, but still with something exciting about them, and she hastened to the door to admit Mr. Peter Manningham.

His appearance augured something unusual. He had never called at the house but once, when she was ill of a sore throat, and then he had only inquired at the door, though no proper attention had been lacking, and the shop-boy had been sent daily with inquiries and presents. Peter made it a point of honor to make no advances to her in business hours; it was the right thing to court a girl under her parents' roof; and as he now entered, arrayed with a precision even beyond his usual wont, and with a somewhat conscious air, she felt the first step was being made toward a formal declaration, and could guess what had brought it to pass just now.

"Oh—good-evening. Miss Chapman—are you—I think—this is such a pleasant evening. I thought I would call and inquire—I have been for some time intending to allow myself the pleasure——"

"I am very glad to see you," said Bertha, "will you sit down?" and as he did so, looking wofully astray and out of place, he began again: "It is not because—I mean, my brother and myself thoroughly appreciate your usefulness, and I have been wishing for some time that we could meet more in a social way——"

"Oh, there 's not the least need of that; I 'm sure you 've both been good enough to me, Mr. Manningham. I could n't do too much for you, if I tried."

"My sister-in-law—you know she does n't interfere in the business in any way; but I hope she will be able to show you some little attention."

"I don't want to give Mrs. Manningham trouble; we don't go with none of her friends," said Bertha, tranquilly.

"I 'm sure such a young lady as yourself—she would be most happy—" faltered Manningham. How irksome was the scene! but how delicious it would be, he dimly thought, to sit there an accepted lover, not obliged to say anything, and free to "live by gazing" at that beautiful head, bent low in the light of

the one small lamp. But silence was not the proper thing for a caller, and in vain he racked his brains for something to say.

Bertha, meanwhile, sat at her work quite at ease. She would willingly have discussed shop matters with him from a practical point of view; but he had not come for that, and after one or two desultory remarks about the weather, and the season, he asked if her father and mother were at home? "I shall be very glad to see them."

"I will tell them," said Bertha, rising and passing into the back regions where "Dr. Van Winkle and Mr. Smutt," as one might say, "the Duchess of Norfolk and Mr. Smith," were in the habit of spending their evenings. A mother was to Bertha a being to whom respect was due, irrespective of her qualities, and she gave the message without reluctance, pleased, indeed, and touched, by Mr. Manningham's behavior. If it were only of any use!

"Dear me! What think he wants to see me for?" inquired the lady of the house with alacrity. Perhaps he wants to consult me about something; them big fine-looking men often have internal complaints; or perhaps he 's lost something. I guess, Bertha, I 'd better go in alone, had n't I?"

"No, indeed!" said Bertha; "he only came

to make a call;" and she inspected her mother a little doubtfully. Mrs. Van Winkle would undoubtedly be the better for a thorough washing and combing; but the time and labor this would take could not be calculated, so Bertha only gave her a few surface touches. After all, her state of griminess was so even and all-pervading, that it was not particularly striking, and by lamplight her imposing outline might pass. Bertha also extended her supervision to Mr. Smutt, to whom she never failed to render such attentions as she considered a step-father's due; but she concluded that his shirt was in an utterly unpresentable condition, and that, as he was not allowed to anticipate his Sunday one, he must remain in seclusion.

"This is Mr. Manningham — Mr. Peter, mother," she said, as they entered, and then quietly took up her work again.

"I am very glad to see you in our humble home," said the lady, overflowing the small rocking-chair in which she sat down.

"It is very pleasant, I am sure," said Manningham.

"It ain't what I 've been accustomed to, when my daughter's father was alive or Mr. Van Winkle. But I feel it gives me the privilege of doing more good—that 's all I live for."

"It is a noble object," said her visitor,

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approvingly, and looking for agreement from Bertha. "I believe you have a large family, have you not? You must have a great deal of care."

"I do not allow my family to weigh on my mind. That 's a part of my faith. I trust them to higher guidance."

"I am glad you have such confidence in Dr. Bowers. I suppose you mean him. I know that 's where Miss Bertha goes."

"I don't have no opinion of Dr. Bowers as a guide. He 's a worthy man, I allow, but he 's hide-bound by prejudice. Bertha don't need none of his guidance. She 's got unerring counsellors that can't go wrong."

"Mother means the spirits," said Bertha, turning a hem; "but I can't say as I ever took their guidance that I know of."

"That 's all very well for you to say, but how else are you going to account for things? Answer me that. You 've never had any human teacher that I know of. It 's the spiritual influxes that have got you along to where you are, though you may n't recognize it."

"Miss Bertha has very fine qualities," said Manningham, trying to lead the conversation to a point to him intelligible. I assure you, she 's of so much use, we 'd find it hard to get along without her, though if it was on her own

account — anything for her good, we might ——"

"I believe you! Poor earthbound, yet helplessly and hopelessly aspiring man needs a maternal influence; he wants to be mothered! It 's what his whole nature 's crying out for in the wilderness, and it 's what woman 's got to do for him. It 's what Bertha does for you, though you don't know it by that name. She knows what belongs to the character." And as Manningham's face assumed an expression that might have been horrified but for its utter bewilderment: "Oh, I don't mean in her present earthly career! I was referring to her past incarnations. There ain't many girls that have had as many as she has. You know we claim that woman, in virtue of her manifold reincarnations, is older than any man, and has, in other incarnations, been tempted in all points as men are now tempted. So it is exactly this greater age and greater experience in the toils of self-development and self-harmonization that has rendered woman a helpmate for and guide in man's needs."

"Of course," said her puzzled hearer, "we must allow that the ladies are greatly our superiors."

"I object to the word lady," said Mrs. Van Winkle, "it calls up to my mind one of those lazy aristocrats who fold their jewelled fingers,

on their silken couches, and shut their eyes to all the woes of enslaved humanity, while they themselves are but the purchased slaves of some man——"

Mr. Manningham was silent. He had imagined that after long years devoted to their service, he knew the "ladies" pretty thoroughly, but here was a specimen he had never encountered yet. He glanced at Bertha, and was equally perplexed at seeing a sparkle of mirth in her eyes, and a suppressed smile on her lips, though her cheeks were burning. Mrs. Van Winkle was accustomed to silent listeners, and proceeded:

"Yes, woman has lived and striven through countless æons to fit her for her grand reviving and renovating mission to man, and now she 's reached the period to achieve it. But that she may fulfil it in the full splendor of its capabilities, man must do his part."

"I am sure I shall be most happy," murmured Manningham, to whom these last words had a more familiar ring. He had heard something of the kind before, and it usually meant money. "Most happy," he uttered in more confident tones, and his hand involuntarily sought his breeches pocket. But he had mistaken his woman this time. Mrs. Van Winkle scorned to stoop to soliciting cash from a visitor who had not come "solely on business." With

a wave of the hand she arrested his half-formed purpose, and went on in a guttural tone. "Man must recognize the comparative recency of his attainments, and the incompleteness of his one-sided achievements."

"Certainly," said Manningham, "there seems a great deal of truth in what you say."

"Now, in this matter of healing—the treatment of so-called disease—here 's man for centuries been studying it up, and writing books about it, and what does it all come to? Has he taken the first step to banish disease and death out of the universe? You know better. But once let a woman—like me, we 'll say, who really has the healing instinct—take to practising, there 's no need of her wasting her time over the so-called literature of this race of charlatans. She just does it all by perception of the spiritual influx and efflux. That 's the way I do, and I don't mean to boast, for I did n't make my gift. It 's a natural one. Why, there ain't any one I know of could equal Bertha at it, if she chose to practise."

"Mr. Manningham 's heard enough about me for one while," said Bertha; and in a lower tone, "you 've stayed long enough for the first time, I guess."

Mrs. Van Winkle took the hint more promptly than might have been expected, when arrested in so fine a flow of words. She

regarded freedom from chaperonage as the normal condition of a young woman, and only lingered to offer Mr. Manningham some of her "leaflets," which he ruefully but respectfully took.

"I suppose you think mother 's a trifle queer," said Bertha; and as he vainly struggled for a polite disclaimer, "there 's a plenty that talk like she does, though I guess you never came across them. They don't mean half they say, and they don't half know what they mean;" and she pinched her hem with a little extra energy.

"Mrs. Van Winkle has a fine amount of language; I suppose she sometimes gets a little carried away by it."

"Yes; she is n't half as bad as they make her out," wound up Bertha, abruptly.

"I assure you I had n't the least intention of saying anything—anything unpleasant!"

"I know you had n't, but I want you to know what I mean. There is n't anything goes on in this house that the law could get hold of."

"My dear Miss Bertha!"

"The bills don't get paid very quick, but they get paid at last."

"You mistake me entirely!"

"And as to me, I tell you truly, I 've never done a thing I 'd mind the whole world knowing; that is, as far as I 'm concerned."

"Pray don't say any more; you pain me more than I can express."

"It is n't what you say, but what you may be thinking, that I 'm talking about."

"I never thought—I never dreamed—of any such thing!"

"I believe you; but you would n't have been the least to blame, if you had. I only wanted to have this point thoroughly understood, once for all. If you 'll take my word for it, why, so much the better. We need n't ever say any more about it; that is, if you mean to keep me on at the store."

"I certainly do—at present—that is, I mean, unless you can find something you like better."

"Oh, there 's not much chance of that, just now."

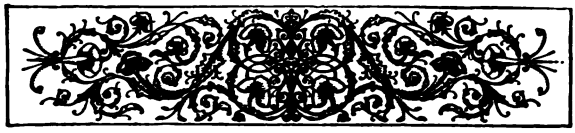
"I think I must be going. I 've had a very pleasant call."

"Thank you. It was kind in you to come. I suppose you have n't time for many calls."

"I hope—I should like to come again, if my visits are agreeable to you."

"You 'd better not give yourself all that trouble," said Bertha, as she rose. Her rich expressive voice gave a glow of warmth to her words, even when the words themselves were cold. Mr. Manningham was shocked at her mother's ways, and disturbed by her own. How could a daughter have such a mother,

and take nothing from her? And if the girl saw through the parent, why so much the worse. He had the old-fashioned American horror of plain-speaking, and he had almost as lief Bertha had lost her reputation, as that she should defend it so openly. He knew he had much better not go there again, and still her words of warning rang in his ear like an irresistible call; while she, dissatisfied with herself, wished she had made them yet more marked.



X

EVENING STARS

THAT same evening some of Mrs. Binney's friends arrived suddenly from Boston. She asked a few others in to meet them, and had a little music for their entertainment—an impromptu affair, such as she often gave; and while Bertha was speculating about the cause of Roland's absence, he was hanging, all devotion, over one arm of the chair occupied by Miss Sarah Lewis, who was doubly favored by fortune, for at her other hand sat William Noyes. Miss Wentworth, at the piano, was playing one of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words;* and every one was listening attentively, as became them when the hostess's niece was the performer. Ruth had been well taught, had a quick ear and a nice touch, and excellent taste, and all good judges praised her style. With all these qualifications, her playing could never stir the heart; but something about her did, and William Noyes, who could not tell one tune from another, honestly believed it

was her music. A more discerning observer might have recognized the fact that the delight went in at the eyes; and that the pretty tinkle her hands made was a pleasant accompaniment to the subtle charm of sight in her slender white-robed figure, and delicately outlined head, where one cream-white rose melted into her nut-brown hair in the soft pervasive light shed bywax candles in the old silver candelabras.

She ceased, and the buzz of conversation awoke on the instant.

"How sweetly, how divinely, dearest Ruth plays!" cried Sarah. "I could listen to her forever; could not you?"

"As I am now—indeed I could," murmured Roland in her ear.

"Roland! how can you!" returned the young lady, in louder tones, and an apologetic look at her other neighbor, who had heard nothing. His eyes were following Ruth, who had gone into the next room, and who now came back through the heavily curtained archway, conducting to the instrument a roundabout, flat-faced, fair-wigged German woman, about whom she hovered with graceful assiduity, fussily seconded by Charley Binney, who carried the lady's pile of music, which he scattered twice all over the floor, before she was finally able to collect it, and begin in peace.

She was only Ruth's old teacher, and many of the party saw no need of stinting their talk for her, though she played ten times as well as her pupil. Roland, who loved music too well to endure this when any worth hearing was going on, shifted about restlessly, lost the thread of Miss Lewis's prattle, and at last walked to the piano and leaned over it, lost to all else but the melody of the second of Schubert's *Musical Memories*. He had a little bit of love-making ready for the player when she had come to an end, and Frau Riemer, though old enough to be his mother, was not too old or too wise to like it.

"Frau Riemer plays beautifully, does n't she?" Sarah was asking of William.

"Yes, very."

"Almost as well as dear Ruth; of course no one can play quite so well as she does."

"Don't you play yourself, Miss Lewis?"

"Oh, only a very little! I certainly could n't, now. I never play after Ruth, it would lead to too cruel a comparison."

"I am sure we should all enjoy hearing you; will you not favor us?"

"Oh, no, indeed, Mr. Noyes! No, really, you are so good, I hate not to oblige you; but I know that you are so very, very kind and thoughtful, you won't press me. I should never, never dare to!"

As William was not sufficiently versed in his social duties to press the young lady, their conversation might have languished, but just then Roland, taking up a mandolin from the window-seat, began to sing after his usual desultory fashion anything that came into his head. No need of polite pretence at attention now. Even Miss Lewis sat silent and absorbed. There is no saying how long he might have gone on, even after supper was ready and waiting, if a little stir at the door had not heralded the entrance of the head of the Wentworth family. Mrs. Binney might not enter her brother-in-law's house, but he had no objection to entering hers, especially when supper was imminent.

Mr. Wentworth, though shorter than his son, was in figure not unlike him, and though Roland and Ruth were each said to be their mother's image, a very sufficient resemblance to both might be traced in his features, which might yet pass for having once been handsome. But he was rarely at ease in the society of his equals in position, and less so here than anywhere else, and his constraint was contagious. Mrs. Binney bowed, without holding out her hand, and he returned her greeting with a nod and a muttered word or two, and responded in like manner to the salutations of such of the company as he considered it worth

his while to be civil to. He threw a scrutinizing look at his son and daughter, and as the latter had taken her brother's empty chair next Sarah, his glance in her direction could not help taking in William Noyes. There was a slight attentive pause among the rest, and Mrs. Binney looked apprehensive, but William was equal to the occasion. He rose, and quietly presented his own chair for Mr. Wentworth, who dropped into it with a growl and a grunt which might pass for a recognition. The hostess was relieved, and turned to her nephew with a low remark:

"Mr. Noyes seems to have such nice manners!"

"Oh, yes. Bill 's a good fellow enough."

"I don't remember asking him to-night. Did you? I am rather surprised at his coming without a direct invitation from me. I should not have thought him forward."

"Oh, I dare say I told him to come. If I did, I gave him one of your at-home cards properly filled out. He would n't have come otherwise."

"But, Roland dear, I would rather you would n't send out my cards without consulting me."

"I assure you, dearest tantine, I am most discriminating."

"Yes, but——"

"This was partly on my own account, and partly an act of charity. I thought he 'd be just the thing for Sarah Lewis. Sarah must marry somebody, and I suppose it is incumbent on me to supply the man, as I own I don't feel quite up to sacrificing myself in the cause."

"Oh, no! But do you think it would be a good thing for Sarah to marry so out of her own circle? To be sure, he is a very worthy young man, and very promising, I believe, and if he seems to fancy her——"

The lady looked for the pair of whom she was speaking, but they had drifted far apart. Miss Lewis was being helped by Charley Binney to a generous allowance of salmon mayonnaise, with accompaniments to match; and where was Mr. Noyes? Could that black outline of a manly figure, and that flowing cloud of white that loomed dimly visible among the flowers in the conservatory, belong to him and Miss Wentworth? Mrs. Binney looked mild surprise at Roland.

"Oh, that 's all right!" he replied. Of course there must be something to attract him here at first. He 's smitten with Ruth, I dare say, but so much the better chance for Sarah, when he finds the other won't do. You see it 's not for nothing that I 've been studying *Romeo and Juliet*."

"How did that — fellow get there?" was

Mr. Wentworth's inquiry, without preface, when he found himself and his children together at home.

"Oh, he goes everywhere now," said Roland, tranquilly, "so I suppose he comes to my aunt's."

"Well, he does n't come here, mind that!"

"I suppose it is n't necessary, unless we give something very general."

"I 'd have the devil here first."

"Well, on a general occasion, I hardly think we could leave *him* out. But I doubt if he 'd come; from what I have seen of him, I think he prefers to make the third in a party."

XI

STORM CLOUDS

BERTHA waited for nearly a week before Roland came again, a long time for him, and she began to grow anxious. Probably he was in Boston, and his visits there never came to any good end. When he came at last it was evident that something had gone wrong. The very drag of his foot on the doorstep sounded a warning to her foreboding heart, which her first look at him confirmed. He was pale and worn and jaded, and at such moments his future would glare at her, a threatening spectre, from the still youthful lines of his face. The hideous little room with its dingy oilcloth, its stained and tattered paper, and its rickety furniture, with which at ordinary times he was content as a background for his love-making, seemed now to jar on his nerves.

"Quite idyllic here, on my word!" he began, as he restlessly shifted his place from beside her on the slippery haircloth sofa, to an equally uncertain chair with a broken leg. "The very

atmosphere redolent of perfume! Can't you afford to keep Smutty in better tobacco? The scent of his clay pipe is wafted in from the back doorstep, where I believe your mother keeps him when he is smoking."

"Shall we go out to walk?" asked Bertha. When he grew restless she would often walk the streets with him for hours, regardless of whom she met, or what they might say or think of her; or in winter she would go with him to the policemen's, or the firemen's, or any ball going that was respectable and not too select; but none such was available just now.

"What! this wretched foggy, east-windy night? It 's damp as a cellar here. I don't know but I 'll go round to Tighe's a moment," he added, stretching himself as he rose, and uneasily pacing the narrow bounds, impatient as a sick child who does not know what ails it. Yet to Bertha's quick perception there was a kind of appeal to her to be kept back about his tone and manner, and she made haste to answer:

"Oh, no, Roland! don't go! Why, you 're only just come, and you have n't seen me for ever so long! I 've missed you so!" and she sprang to her feet and thrusting her arm through his raised her face close to him, and looked into his eyes with a smile in her own. No lover ever gazed into more beautiful eyes

than Bertha's; but beauty loses its power with habit, and she was afraid that hers, the strongest weapon at her command, was getting to be an old story to Roland. "To be sure," she added, mischievous dimples playing round the corners of her red lips, "I have had company. Guess who came to see me Monday night?"

"Can't say, I 'm sure, unless it was old Peter Manningham. Why, was it really? that 's a joke! I thought the old fellow looked as if I were poaching on his manor the other day; in fact, I went there partly to see what he might be up to."

"Yes, and you scared me, I can tell you. I thought Mr. Manningham was coming here to give me warning for letting you make such a scene in the store."

"Well, did n't he?"

"No, not this time."

"Oh, he 's coming again, is he? Perhaps to make you the offer of another position."

"I dare say he may if I choose to let him."

"Oh, he may propose all he wants to. I don't mind that. You can let me know when he 's coming again; it will make an amusing variety to meet him here, and make him squirm a little. I say, Bertie, if this goes on, you must ask him to give me a place behind his counter, where I can keep my eye on you. It will be for his advantage, for only think how I

should draw the women! A different set, you can tell him, from your beggarly admirers, who take all the morning to buy a pair of gloves."

"Now, Roland, I 'm not going to have you make fun of Mr. Manningham. He 's a good man; and if I could only make up my mind to take him——"

"Well?"

"It might be better for me."

"You may be thankful to take him yet; who knows? but by —— he does n't come first, that 's all!" Roland's jealousy had reached a point where it ceased to amuse, and roused the savage in him. He threw his arms round Bertha with something in his grasp that made her struggle and free herself with an effort that carried her half across the room.

"Let me go, Roland! I won't have you behave like that! Let me go, I say!"

"You are the oddest girl I ever saw. There 's never any saying what you 'll stand, or what you won't," muttered Roland, disconcerted, looking at her as she stood with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes, breathing defiance.

"I wonder," she was thinking, "how much I could stand, if it were for any good!"

How could she ever make him understand what she felt? She strove for words for a moment, and then nature, held down like a wild beast, broke loose and sprang at her, and the

choking in her throat and burning in her eyes dissolved in a great flood of sobs and tears.

"Why, Bertha, what 's the matter? My darling Bertie—my own dearest—don't! There—please—forgive me!"

Who could be so loving, so tender, as Roland, when he wanted to be? As Bertha lay back faint and exhausted on the sofa, and he brought her ice-water, and laid his own fine handkerchief, wet and cold, on her forehead, and stroked her hand, and murmured all sorts of sweet little nothings in her ear, gently as a mother to a baby, she could not help allowing herself to taste the delight of it all, even though telling herself all the time that this was a pleasure which must not be too often indulged in.

What made Bertha Chapman love Roland Wentworth? Other women could allow that it was natural, though of course highly blamable "in her position." But to men—to a steady, respectable young man like William Noyes, who had, from early childish acquaintance at school, a kindness for her which for her own sake he thought it best to show but little, the fact was as wholly inexplicable as it was to Joseph Manningham, who had excused her on the score of girls never knowing the whole truth about young men, and the unaccountableness with which they are wont to fall in love. But Bertha knew Roland through and

through, better than he knew himself. There was nothing in his experience which he had not told her, and a great deal more beside, which she was discerning enough to distinguish as mere vain rhodomontade. As for falling in love with him, she knew perfectly well the when and why. As long as she would remember anything earthly, she could recall that day of her childhood, when she was sent to a dancing school, which Roland and Charley, and some of the boys of the better class, chose to attend, though it was not thought sufficiently select for their sisters. Bertha had no difficulty in getting in, with the rest of her class in the public school. She was a girl of twelve then, with an unformed figure and large hands and feet, mercilessly displayed by a hideous dress reform costume, which Mrs. Van Winkle had invented and patented, and on which she insanely hoped to turn a penny. She remembered how the mothers had eyed her over, and the girls, even her special friends, had tittered and turned their backs, and how the boys had ridiculed her, till Roland Wentworth thrashed them right and left, danced half the dances with her, and walked home with her afterwards. "Never mind 'em! You 'll be the handsomest of them all in a year or two!" he had said; for Roland, at fourteen, was precocious in his discernment of physical attractions.

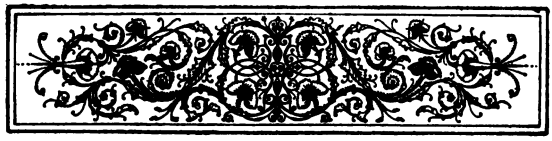
From that moment she had loved him with a love that could not be shaken; and he loved her too, with a feeling compounded of sensual pleasure in her beauty, and what might be called respect for her character. For any purity of womanhood, in Bertha or any other girl but that exceptional being, his sister Ruth, he had no respect at all, no perception of it even; but he had an admiration for her strength of mind, and a half-conscious leaning on it, such as he might have felt for the like in another young man. She did not trouble herself to assert any further claims, being aware that any such action would impair her hold on his constancy—about as misnomered a quality as his love. Beauty, she knew, was a fading flower; but she did not believe that Roland could ever get along without her. Any over-freedom on his part was set aside with no show of virtuous indignation, as something silly, and when, piqued by this reception, he would now and then fervently press immediate marriage, she would laugh at that too, though she was fully determined on it just as soon as she saw any —the faintest—possibility of their being able to keep their heads above water.

That prospect seemed quite as uncertain as ever, to-night: when, after Roland had left her, she slowly dragged herself up the stairs. There was no running to the window to look

after him now; she sat down on the foot of her bed with folded arms and bowed head, like a monumental statue.

Bertha seldom prayed. She could not tell what to ask for. No change for the better seemed possible in her circumstances, unless every one who surrounded her could be entirely made over; and not only did this seem to demand the reconstruction of the universe, but she was not sure that she sincerely wished it. Where would the making over stop with Roland? and would he be her Roland when it did? Then as to any improvement in her own character, which might be needful enough, she did not know exactly in what direction to ask for it. Patience and resignation, for example, might seem demanded by the situation, but she could not be sure that she did not exercise them to excess already: while praying that all might be taken care of and brought out all right somehow, as some girls might have found comfort in doing, appeared to her the vainest of repetitions. However, she was accustomed to practise a mental exercise that was somewhat equivalent, and that was, forcing herself to put up with the world and her place in it. She could not sleep till she felt that she was willing and ready to rise tomorrow and take up the burden and care of the day. She sat long at this to-night; but at last

she rose and with a heavy sigh slipped off her gown, and then drew out the two or three great pins that held up her coils of hair. One shake of the head, and the heavy masses weighed down her shoulders; another, and they wreathed round her waist; another, and they fell to her knees. She ran her fingers through them, and there was relief in the action. She could go to bed and sleep; yes, and could rise and hurry off to her work in the soft gray showery spring morning, with the quick pulses of youth still ready to thrill with pleasure at the cool touch of the little tapping raindrops on her cheek, and the sweet scents that stole from the old walled-in town gardens on her way.



XII

FOR SWEET ST. CHARITIE

FORTUNE, it will be allowed, had thus far done her best to bring William Noyes and Ruth Wentworth together, without their finding it necessary to lift a finger in their own behalf; for that little talk of theirs in the conservatory, which had made them feel so much better acquainted, was unpremeditated and almost involuntary. But Fortune will not do everything, and it was now the turn of the young people themselves to forward the acquaintance, if they so desired. After his invitation to Mrs. Binney's musical party, the door of that lady's house was opened no more to William, not from any discrimination against him on her part, but because for the present she entertained no one. Her uncle and her son's former guardian, Mr. James Halstead, was now in slowly declining age, and a paralytic stroke, slight, but his second one, occurred about this time. He was childless; and his niece was as a daughter to him. Most of her hours were now passed by his armchair, or in

attending to his affairs, and settling little matters of business for him. There was a pleasure in doing all she could for one to whom she owed so much; a melancholy one, but all Mrs. Binney's pleasures were melancholy. Ruth, who had always been her great-uncle's pet, was very devoted and attentive to him; but her aunt did not wish her to confine herself too closely, and insisted on her driving and walking with Miss Rebecca Halstead, an elderly cousin who was at that time paying one of her long periodical visits; though these diversions were less amusing than the hours she spent by Uncle James. Roland was much away just at this time, and when he was at home was in uncertain spirits; and Charley, without Roland, was dull, and made others dull. There was no chance for her to meet William Noyes except in the street, or in the church porch on Sundays, and Ruth's ideas of propriety would never admit of his stopping to speak to her in either place.

But she saw—through the back of her head it must have been, for she never turned to look—that he now came regularly to the First Parish Church of Bethel, when she sat in her aunt's pew there; or to St. Barbara's, the Episcopal one, when she chose to occupy her father's. The Halsteads had always been Unitarians, and the Wentworths Episcopalians,

and as neither could be wrong, both must be right, and Ruth divided her allegiance between the sects, serenely ready, like a German princess, to go with whomsoever she might marry. This impartiality showed such liberality of spirit that there could surely be no narrowness in excluding all other religious bodies from any serious consideration. Fortunately, William Noyes and his mother belonged to the Second Church, Unitarian also, which though it lacked a little of the fine aristocratic flavor which breathed from the First, was still well within the pale.

"Here is Eleanor Glover," said Mrs. Binney, with a sigh, to Ruth one morning, "writing to me again about the Indians. She says they are in a sad state, and she wants to know if I cannot rouse a little interest about them in Bethel. I did write her once that I was not receiving at all now, but Eleanor is always so earnest, and she has taken up the Indians now —and I thought, if she could get Mr. Woodberry, and Miss Fletcher to come here and speak, I would ask a few people, only ladies, to hear them some afternoon, and give them tea afterwards. It would not be entertaining, exactly."

It certainly did not sound so, but Ruth brightened up at once, and said it would be very nice.

"Will you make out the list, then, dear? Not too large; and write some notes to them? Cousin Rebecca will help you, and Sarah, perhaps. I don't want to be sending out cards for anything, just now. Ask people who you think will take an interest, and perhaps some of them will have more meetings."

Ruth made her list, and brought it to her aunt, who ran through it with some mild criticism, chiefly approving. "Mrs. Tiffany — I don't know her, but I believe she is very philanthropic, and I want some good names from the Second Church. Miss Cummings—who 's she?"

"She goes to our church. I have seen her at Society meetings. She teaches in the High School, and I thought might do something to interest the children."

"Yes, very likely. Mrs. No—Noyes? who 's she?"

"She goes to the Second Church, too, and is very charitable, I believe. I know you wanted some of them," said Ruth; and she added, for she was too honest for the least evasion, "she is mother to Mr. William Noyes, who has been here once or twice."

"Yes—" said Mrs. Binney, very slowly; and then, quick and short, "had n't you better ask Mrs. Joseph Manningham?"

"I think not," said Ruth, tranquilly, "the

Manninghams all go to the Orthodox Church. It seems hardly worth while to begin on that, does it?"

"I suppose not; no, your list is very good; send out the notes as soon as you can, please," said Mrs. Binney, hastily; and turning away, she drew on her gloves with trembling fingers.

These few apparently innocent remarks had expressed the only disagreement she had ever had with her darling Ruth. Something had come between them; what, she would not trust herself to think; and she hurried off to her uncle's without another word. Ruth sat down, and after dutifully writing a dozen notes, she began one to Mrs. Noyes which took more time than all of them had, in consequence of which she sat up late to get through her task; for she knew better than to look for any real help from Cousin Rebecca or Sarah Lewis. After destroying a number of attempts, some of which seemed too warmly, some too stiffly expressed, she sent off one with which she was by no means satisfied. But William Noyes, to whom his mother showed it as soon as she received it, thought that there never was anything so charmingly worded. Mrs. Noyes was pleased, but a little alarmed, at the idea of going, and proposed sending a contribution for the Indians and staying away, but this William would not hear of. Go she must, and

as she never opposed him, she found herself setting forth at the appointed time in a little flutter of agreeable apprehension.

Her dress made no part of her fears, for she was supported by the gratifying knowledge that her black silk gown made four years ago, and her fine straw bonnet that had been retrimmed every spring for the same length of time, were the best that could be bought, even in Boston; and her Cashmere shawl, the light summer one, was a garment for a lifetime. She did indeed present a most respectable appearance, though somewhat suggestive of bandboxes, and such as no young girl of proper Bethel descent and education could object to in a mother-in-law; and she carried in her black velvet bag a very handsome sum as her contribution to the object of the meeting.

"Well, mother!" said William, who had been impatiently waiting for her, when she returned, three hours after setting out, with a look of decidedly higher spirits, "how did you enjoy yourself? They did n't eat you up, did they?"

"Oh, no, indeed!" cried the little lady, eagerly; "I had a most delightful time! Every one was so polite! The house is splendid, indeed! I had forgotten how fine it was, though I have been in it once or twice—when Mr. Binney's mother was buried; you know

she was well acquainted with your Grandmother Parkhurst. I was a girl then, and I dare say they 've done a great deal to it since. I never saw anything so magnificent! The rooms were full of the most beautiful flowers, and——"

"Mrs. Binney was agreeable, I suppose?"

"Oh, most attentive! She found me one of the very best places, right in front, next our minister's wife, and close to the speakers. I told her it was too conspicuous a place for me, and wanted to give it up, but she would n't hear of it."

"Any one you knew there?"

"Oh, yes, indeed! Mrs. Hutchinson, and Mrs. Bosworth spoke so pleasantly to me! and the speeches; they were so interesting! They gave a wonderful account of the work done at Hampton. I was very glad that we could afford to give something. They did not take up any contribution, as I thought they might, but I heard Mrs. Binney tell Governor Atwood —he was there, and spoke, just think of that— that she had raised a small sum among her friends, so I asked her if she would be so kind as to add mine to it, and she seemed much pleased, and said it was a very timely and thoughtful gift. I told her my son was very anxious to contribute to such an excellent object, and she said she had the pleasure of knowing you. She asked if you were my only

child, and I told her yes, but that you were as good as ten to me."

"Nonsense!"

"She smiled, and said I was a fortunate mother, and I thought it was very kind in her not to lay up anything against you, when you had done so much against her brother-in-law. But I don't believe she cares much for him, though she does seem so fond of his daughter. Poor woman! she is a widow, with only one son, too, and I don't believe that she gets the comfort out of him that I do out of my boy. He came in, just at the end — Mr. Charles Binney — is n't he queer looking? He kept laughing all the time and whispering to that pretty cousin of his, Miss Wentworth. She did not seem to like it much. I heard her asking him to be quiet."

"Oh, she was there, was she?"

"Yes, she poured out tea afterwards in the sweetest little room! They had a man and two girls to pass it round, but I thought I would go in and see what it was like, and there was Miss Wentworth and her cousin, Miss Lewis—she seems to know you very well." Mrs. Noyes glanced at her son, who made no response. "I wish," went on the good lady, "you had spoken to me about her, William. I felt rather astonished at finding how far things had gone between you."

"Things! what things?"

"Why—she said she was acquainted with my noble son, and all that; and that you were always talking to her about your dear, darling mother." The corners of Mrs. Noyes's mouth twitched with a smile, which at sight of her son's amazed face developed into a laugh, for though a simple woman of quiet tastes and habits, which she considered proper to what she thought her advanced period of life, this lady was no fool, and could take and enjoy a joke. "I felt sadly stupid," she proceeded, "for I really could n't remember, though I tried, that you had ever said anything to me about her;" and then, as William's amazed look changed into one of disgust; "forgive me, my dear! I did not mean to make fun of her. She seems a nice, lively girl, and—oh, yes, really quite pretty, and lively young girls often say more than they mean. If you like her, and she likes you, it will be all right."

"Good Lord!" broke out William, "you don't suppose I care for Miss Lewis, do you? or she for me?"

"She said——"

"I don't care what she said. You 're right in saying she says more than she means. She may well do that, for I don't believe she means anything. I don't believe she knows enough to."

"Well," said Mrs. Noyes, relieved, "I did think it queer that any young man should look at her while Miss Wentworth was round. Now, there is a girl, that if I were a young man, I should fall in love with;" and, encouraged by some slight sign in her son's expression, she gladly hurried on. "She does have the sweetest ways I ever saw! She noticed, I suppose, that I looked warm when I came, for I had been walking fast, and without saying anything, she took off her own fan, and gave it to me—such a lovely one, of curled white feathers, that hung at her waist by a silver chain. And she did make tea so prettily! She asked me if I was sure I liked mine, and wanted to pour me out another cup when she saw I did n't drink much. I only took it because I could n't bear to refuse her, for I am not accustomed to take tea so early."

Longer did Mrs. Noyes continue to dilate on Miss Wentworth's charms. Her son had not much to say in reply; but his silence had something encouraging about it, and did not fail to suggest ideas to her. She was quite as ready to appreciate the romance of the situation as Ruth had been. There was no denying that the thought might have been a startling one had she not met the lovely little heroine of the tale before it occurred to her. She had sufficient discretion to be very guarded in speaking

of her afternoon tea at Mrs. Binney's to her neighbor, Mrs. Joseph Manningham, who called the next day, and introduced the subject, and she was especially careful not to mention Miss Wentworth's name. There had been a day when she thought that Carry or Laura Manningham might make her a very nice daughter-in-law. She had no doubt that Carry and Laura, and their parents for them, thought so too, and she supposed it very likely that William did. They were just the girls to correspond to the ideal he had formed for a wife; but now one of the undercurrents, strong if silent, which are always sweeping the floating elements of American society into new combinations, was rapidly bearing the shoemaker's grandson on to very different seas from the dry-goods dealer's daughters. He felt it himself as he passed Miss Laura Manningham, two days after, with a civil bow and smile. There was no pausing to walk by her as there would have been three little months ago, for it was just the proper calling hour, and it was Mrs. Binney's day at home, on which her niece always received with her. He would rather have seen Ruth somewhere else. Already he had begun to feel that Mrs. Binney had quite as lief he did not call; but if so, she should not have asked him to her house, after which not to call would be a breach of courtesy.

Miss Laura went on her way, a little piqued, only to behold Mr. Noyes in the distance ascending the great perron of the Binney mansion. The door, and the gray-headed butler who opened it, began to wear a familiar look, and so did the drawing-room, a pleasant room, though injured by having been somewhat incongruously refurnished before the public taste had learned to preserve and repeat the "old colonial" style in which it had been originally built. But nothing could be in better keeping than the tea-table, set with china brought from the Far East in the eighteenth century, or Miss Wentworth sitting by, in her lilac India muslin with white spots, and a bunch of violets stuck in the white sash which would have defined too sharply any waist but one of such slim roundness as hers. "Good-afternoon," Mr. Noyes, she said, blushing ever so slightly and sweetly; "I began to think no one would call. It is getting late in the season, and so many are away now."

"Yes; you go to Beverly, do you not?"

"I am there a great deal in the summer with my aunt; but I doubt whether we shall go at all this year; my great-uncle, Mr. Halstead—you know him, I believe?"

"I have often met him. I am sorry to hear he is so unwell."

"My aunt will not, I think, feel like leaving

him to go anywhere. She will be sorry to miss you, but she is with him now. She asked me to receive any of her friends who might call, with my cousin, Miss Halstead, who is staying here now. Cousin Rebecca! may I present Mr. Noyes?"

A stout middle-aged lady, who was reclining in a large armchair by the window, out of which she was placidly and sleepily gazing, though a new magazine lay open in her lap, looked round with a smile and a few murmured words. She did not recognize anything in the young man's person or name as requiring any more attention from her. William had known Miss Rebecca Halstead by sight ever since he was a little boy, but she had never noticed him, nor indeed any one else whom she met only in Bethel streets. She was leading, at an advanced age, much the same life as Sarah Lewis; indeed, the sight of Aunt Rebecca stranded high and dry was urging Sarah to take those active measures by which she hoped to escape a similar doom. Miss Halstead had always been too lazy for this. Her inertia had never allowed her to be of any use or comfort to those relations among whom she slowly circulated. She could not even flatter actively as could her niece; but there was a lofty ring of superiority in the tone with which she pronounced the names of her kinsfolk that was

perhaps a more effective tribute to their greatness. That she was a Halstead was her one sufficient recommendation. Mrs. Binney and Mr. Halstead nearly supported her between them; yet it seemed quite natural to the former that she should sit by Uncle James day after day, and leave Cousin Rebecca to dawdle about her house and drive in her carriage, and take care of Ruth, that easiest of sinecures. Certainly, William Noyes found the lady a most agreeable chaperon. He had the pleasure of what was practically a long *tête-à-tête* with Miss Wentworth, for though they said nothing that they would have minded Cousin Rebecca's hearing, yet the assurance that she did not hear was somehow stimulating. Ruth told of her dear uncle's illness, and how she visited him every morning, only Aunt Harriet would not let her stay as long as she wanted; and William sympathized, and admired Mrs. Binney; and then in his turn he introduced the subject of his mother, and how much she had enjoyed her afternoon there, and meeting Miss Wentworth; and Ruth in her turn admired Mrs. Noyes, as she conscientiously could. Would not Mrs. Noyes like to call some time and see the house? She believed that that lady in her girlhood had known some of the Binneys, now dead and gone, but whose portraits still graced the walls; and then

she asked if Mr. Noyes would like a cup of tea, and William, who hardly knew the taste of tea, which he regarded as a beverage fit for old ladies only, was eager to say yes, that he might see her make it; and surely anything so gracefully, so daintily prepared, must taste like nectar. He had the honor of carrying a cup of it, carefully sweetened by Ruth to suit the lady's taste, to Miss Halstead; and moreover, to assist her languid choice among delicious little cakes and sandwiches.

It was wonderful how intimate the young people grew during all this; and just as their intimacy had reached a point where it might have reacted and made Ruth shy again, some young friends who had driven over from Beverly Farms came in, and made a break. William, though loath to depart, knew that he must not stay longer, and after some little chat with the newcomers, took his leave with a good grace, the more willingly because Ruth had said that she was going to a tennis party at her cousin's, Mrs. George Wentworth's, the next day, and he had received an invitation. There was no fear now that he would not meet Miss Wentworth at plenty of places; and meet they did all through flowery May and leafy June; and before June roses had shed their petals, he had owned to himself that she was the one girl for him in the wide world, and she had begun

to own to herself that he stood on a different plane from any other man.

It was not without a struggle on both sides that they had come to acknowledge so much. In the romantic interest with which the circumstances of their first meeting had clothed William in Ruth's mind, his inferior position had played no small part. In how many an old tale is not the princess won by unknown knight, or squire of low degree, whose personal qualities transcend his humble sphere? Still, she stoops, and Ruth, truly and innocently, felt herself in every encouragement she gave to William, to be stooping nearly as far. She would have been struck dumb with uncomprehending wonder could she have looked into his mind, and seen that he felt himself, as far as external considerations were concerned, to be stooping quite as low. He was proud of the unblemished rectitude of his ancestors, as far back as records existed, and that was to the founding of Bethel town. The exceedingly smirched reputation of Ruth's father and brother was a bitter pill to swallow, sweetened only by the thought that she was quite unlike all other girls, a pearl of purity that could not even reflect the stain. As for her pedigree and connections and social position, they were to him as the objects of a collector's fad are to one who does not share the taste; rubbish only

valuable for what they would bring, and he thought they had brought the Wentworths very little. He might be ready, even eager, to trample under foot any difficulties that might offer, when the right time came; but he was in no hurry. Ruth and he must know each other a great deal better before he could be sure of her yet; and what could be more blissful than these early courtship days?

Mrs. Noyes had not availed herself of Ruth's invitation. She was shy of doing so, nor did her son wish that she should, sure as he was that when he might desire to expedite matters, all would run most smoothly in that quarter. Mrs. Binney and her niece were now never in company together. Miss Halstead ate her meals and took her nap unregarding. Charley was about, and Miss Lewis came and went, but William did not consider either of them worthy of attention. Roland, the only person whose observation was to be dreaded, was, as has been said, much away, no one knew where, and on his brief visits at home was preoccupied, hard to please, and as much out of humor as he ever could be. If his family had no time to notice Ruth's affairs, they had none for his; and Ruth, who did dimly perceive a difference in him, fancied she could guess the cause, and did not let herself analyze it too closely. Poor dear Roland! of course, she could not say

anything to him about it; but she did hope he was not too jealous of Mr. Noyes's attentions to her. He must like Mr. Noyes when—if—they knew each other better; and she was sure Roland could never be really angry with her for anything she might do.

Bertha Chapman, it will readily be believed, did not take Roland's present condition as easily as did his sister. She had perceived for some time that he was moody, uncertain in temper, and rousing himself to exertion by fits and starts. He came to see her but seldom, and appeared to dislike any notice of the circumstance so much, that she could only wait in silence, the more patiently because she could guess the reason of it all. Roland had been just like this two years ago, when going through a long season of high play at a Boston gambling saloon. His present excited humor denoted that he was still in the winning vein; and when that was the case, it was useless to dream of his leaving off, and any efforts of hers to persuade him to do so would only irritate him, and be worse than wasted. The probable end, and the best that was to be hoped for, was that he would at last lose so much at one *coup* as to frighten him. His cousin Charley would come down with the needful cash as he had done before, and he would keep clear of such places for another while. She quieted her apprehensions

with such assurances, and waited anxiously, but by no means despairingly, only trying to be as cheerful as possible during his brief visits, aided therein by the knowledge that while this was going on, he would have no time or thought to spare for Mrs. Tom Silloway or any other woman. Bertha had never known things to be so bad that they might not be worse.

XIII

A THUNDER CLAP

IT was a beautiful evening in the last week in June, and Mrs. Arthur Hutchinson had been entertaining a few of the *élite* of Bethel, who were principally composed of her relations, at tea; none of your new-fashioned five-o'clock teas, but an old style high tea at half-past six. The long summer twilight allowed of strolling about the garden afterwards; a small garden, but bright and sweet with flowers of June. In spite of the appellation, the meal was a sparse one, though exquisitely served; and William Noyes, the sole guest outside the family clique, could have eaten a great deal more than was offered him. It was not like the teas he had once been in the habit of attending at Mrs. Joseph Manningham's, where the hostess would proudly proclaim that the endless stream of good things was due to the efforts of her girls. It was not likely that Ruth Wentworth knew how to cook; she hardly seemed to know how to eat; but William was now so deep in love

that he could forget the pangs of hunger in admiring the dainty way in which she sipped her tea from a priceless porcelain cup without a handle, and an old silver spoon most inconveniently deep, or trifled, half reluctantly, with a single sponge-drop.

The incipient love affair between these two young people had begun to attract the attention of their world, and Mrs. Hutchinson had doubted very much whether or not she ought to ask the young man. She feared Harriet Binney might not approve; she wished she had a chance to consult her in a casual way; only it was so hard to get at Harriet now. But people were beginning to look for something in that quarter, and if no food for their conjectures were offered at her party, it might turn out dull, which was not to be borne, so she boldly risked consequences and invited him. Certainly, though Miss Wentworth and he did very little by their own efforts to entertain the others, their presence gave a zest to the pleasure of all but Charley Binney, who looked forlorn, and Sarah Lewis, who seemed to find her task of amusing him up-hill work. Moreover, just as the party was at its height, Roland strolled in, looking a little fagged, but in the gayest spirits, which he communicated to everybody else. He greeted his sister most affectionately, taking no notice of the slight hesitation with which

she advanced to meet him, with William Noyes by her side. He was most cordial to William himself, and after a few low-toned words from him, Charley's customary "haw-haw" and Sarah's "how can you?" were heard to revive with double energy.

"You 'll come home with me, will you not?" said Ruth to him when the guests began to disperse at a later hour than usual, owing to his late appearance.

"Can't possibly, dear angel; I 've another engagement."

"Why, where can you have one? There is nothing else to-night surely?"

"I have a special engagement with a most particular friend—nothing else would tear me from your side, I assure you."

"Well, then, take me home first."

"I 'm an hour late already. Here 's Charley would be only too happy. It would be unkind not to give him the chance. Never mind, old fellow; she meant to have you all along;" as Charley grinned acquiescence.

Ruth hesitated a moment, and then turned suddenly round with "Come, Sarah, do walk home with me; it is such a lovely evening, and Charley will bring you back here afterwards—won't you, Charley?"

"Oh, that will be lovely!" cried Miss Lewis. "Mr. Noyes, you 'll come too?" and the

quartette set off together. Roland looked condescendingly amused, his nearest approach to acknowledging himself defeated, and making his own adieux, strolled the other way. Even the shabby street into which he turned was transfigured in the moonlight. The whiffs of perfume from hardy disregarded syringas in the yards might have been from orange groves, and set him whistling, with passionate sweetness, *Voi che sapete*, so that Bertha knew he was coming, and was ready and waiting at the door.

"O Roland!" she cried, "how good of you to come! It 's a whole week since you were here! I 've been so worried about you; but you look better now; more like yourself;" and then, a little doubtfully, as she drew him into the lamplighted room: "do—do tell me what the matter is?"

"Matter? a mere trifle, I assure you! What can be of any consequence in the light of your presence? You 've a new wrinkle in dressing your hair, I perceive. Good heavens, what a lot you have of it, and how delicious it feels!" running his fingers through the thick dark fragrant waves.

"What has happened?"

"I 'm done for, my dear — played out — ruined, if you like it put more elegantly — that 's all."

XIV

A VAIN APPEAL

RALPH WENTWORTH, Esquire, transacted most of his ostensible business in a little upstairs office in a cheap brick block on Wessex Street, that was old enough to look shabby, though modern enough to stand out as an unpardonable intruder on the old-fashioned repose of Bethel. He did not take much pains to freshen up its fittings or surroundings, and indeed some of his clients would have been repelled by over smartness. Female visitors were not strangers there, but such a one as entered the open street door on a prematurely hot June afternoon the day after Mrs. Hutchinson's party was somewhat beyond the common strain; a tall, superbly moulded figure, clothed in soft black silk with a good deal of black lace about it. The wide white revers on the body, where they were turned away at the throat from a vest of white of the same dead softness, showed an inner lining of vivid carmine, while the cluster of pure white roses on

her large black hat rose from a bow of the same color; the whole forming a harmony subtle and yet dazzling, like the plumage of a rose-breasted grosbeak. As she swept without effort up the narrow dusty staircase, she looked like the bird itself gone astray in city ways, and as her head and shoulders rose clear against the measureless depths of blue summer sky which the open window let in in full pitiless contrast to the dingy battered wall within, you would almost have expected her to fly out and away into the azure fields. But she came to a pause in front of the office door, knocked with no hesitating touch, and, responding to an indistinguishable monosyllable from within, pushed back the door, which stood ajar, and entered.

Mr. Wentworth, who was sitting in his shirt-sleeves, was prepared by the rustle of her dress for a female caller, but he had not expected one before whom any especial observation of the lesser proprieties of life was necessary, and he actually reddened as he muttered an indistinct apology, without making the deficiencies of his costume more noticeable by rising.

"I 'm sorry to trouble you, but I 've some rather important business," began Bertha.

"Don't mention it," said Wentworth, still confused. He had not at first perceived who his visitor was. Bertha Chapman did not come often in his way; in fact, he hardly knew her

name; but he had seen her once or twice with his son, and once seen, she was not to be forgotten. As recognition dawned in his face, the respect, such as it was, of his first greeting, gave way to a sort of patronizing gallantry. "I am sure it is a most agreeable interruption." he said.

"I am in a great hurry," said Bertha; "I only want to see you a few minutes—alone."

"As many as you want."

"There 's no one else here?" she went on, looking round the room.

"Not a soul," said Wentworth. He rose, and throwing wide open the door to show her that his inner office was empty, locked the entrance door of his outer one, "There now, sit down, my dear, and tell me what you want."

Bertha took no notice of his invitation except to rest her hand on the table near her, and he remained standing too, not far from her. "My name is Bertha Chapman," she said, "perhaps you 've heard of me?"

"Of course—I could hardly help it;" with something between a nod and a bow.

"Your son knows me very well," she continued, and then stopped short. He had said nothing, but there had come at her last words a sudden hateful look of intelligence into his face, which struck her almost as if he had given her a blow in hers. "I suppose you know

what I 've come for," she hurried on, a dawning comprehension of its meaning tingling in every vein.

"If you 've been intimate with my son, I fancy I can guess. You 're not the first by a long chalk. But there 's no use coming to me with complaints; I could n't make him do anything for you, if I would. Don't take on, my dear; he 's not worth spoiling your pretty eyes about, and with such a pair as yours you need never be in want of a friend. My advice to you is to drop him and look out for some one else. You should n't have thrown yourself away on a do-nothing boy like him."

"I don't know what you mean," said Bertha. "I 've nothing to complain of from Roland. I mean something quite different; you know of course what he 's been doing—about you. I came to see you about that."

"Then you came to see about the most utter young rascal in the country. He 's always doing something disgraceful; I don't know as it 's worse now than any other time." His look was vicious, but it was easier to meet than that of a moment ago, and Bertha continued, hardily:

"But this is on your own account. Unless you 'll pay down at least a part of the money, and give some sort of promise about the rest, they 'll lodge a complaint about it next week, and the whole thing will come out."

"Let it."

"It 'll be a terrible disgrace to the family."

"Family! what family?"

"Well, to you, then."

"I can stand it."

"Why, it 's a State's prison offence; seven years, perhaps."

"If 't was fifty years, he 'd have to stay there for all me. Let him try it—he should have thought of that before. What 's the use of talking? I have n't got the money—that 's the long and short of it"

"But you can get it. I 've no doubt that Roland's aunt and cousin would give it, if they knew."

"Then ask 'em."

"I don't know Mrs. Binney; she would be more likely to give to you; and I thought I would ask you first."

"Well, you 've asked, and you have n't been kicked out of my office, as you would have been if you were a man. I 've nothing to do with Roland Wentworth's affairs, d—— him! I 've given him house-room and spending money, too. I only wish I had back all he 's cost me; and this is the reward I get from him. It was all wasted on him; he could screw all he wanted any time out of the Binneys, d——d squeamish, hypocritical set, always teaching him impertinence to me. Let them get him

out of the scrape now, and pay for it. If they don't, let him go to jail and rot there. But they 'll do it—I 'll like to see 'em make a few faces over it—they 'll do it, for the *family.*" Mr. Wentworth accentuated these last words with something between a sneer and a whine.

Bertha turned silently away.

"Going, my dear? Don't be in a hurry; let us have a little talk about you. I believe you are employed in a store, now, but surely you are fit for something with better pay and lighter work—a gentleman's housekeeper, we 'll say. I 've no doubt you 'd do admirably at that; to a middle-aged man, for example. I would n't throw myself away on a boy again, if I were you."

His last words were lost on air, for Bertha had turned the key and left the room as he spoke, and he only heard the rustle of her silken draperies along the passage, slowly, for she scorned to hurry, though her pulses were beating fast. Although her visit to him had been even more unpleasant than she expected, she was not so much disappointed in the main result. She had never expected any solid help from him, and there was some satisfaction in being obliged to go on without the aid of his influence. It would now be necessary to hold that interveiw with Miss Wentworth for which she had hoped as a possibility. Bertha had

always cherished a yearning admiration for Ruth, and not merely because she was Roland's sister and so like him. There was something about her sweet serene sheltered air of high-bred grace that attracted the other girl all the more because she knew it for a charm that she herself could never possess. She grudged Ruth not one iota of the care and watchfulness that surrounded her. It was a delight to her to know that there could be such a white unsullied flower of girlhood, and not for worlds would she have had it torn from its high protecting cluster of encircling foliage, or know one waft of a breeze too rough, though her own bloom must every day be spattered with the mud and beaten with the wind. She would not even crave one breath of the flower's priceless perfume, if her approach must cast ever so faint a shadow on its outermost petal; but if some day it might be right for them to meet, it would be happiness for her.

XV

A VANISHING DREAM

WHEN Ruth was younger, she used to enter Manninghams' like a sunbeam, with her aunt, or sometimes with only a long list of commissions for that lady, and perform her little errands with so sweet a grace, that every one from the partners down was eager to serve her, and once or twice, when she had met Manninghams' handsome shop-girl in the street —it did not often happen, for their hours and ways were different—she had nodded with a pleasant smile. But now she never came, or her aunt either. Mrs. Binney would send her maid with the list, which was not the same thing to Manninghams' feelings, and caused a diminution in their receipts too, though she did not intend it should. When Ruth met Bertha now, she did not see her. Bertha could guess why, and did not blame her. It was not to be expected that Miss Wentworth would be pleased with her brother's marriage when it came, as some day it must, and she looked

forward to this part of the business with more apprehension than to any other, though there was sure to be plenty that was unpleasant about it under the most favorable circumstances.

But now it seemed as if what she had longed for without daring to hope might really come to pass, and they might be brought together before the marriage in a way that would take the awkwardness out of the introduction, and unite them in one object, so vital to both that they could not fail to understand each other. Once let them feel that they must work together for Roland's honor, his safety even, and all minor points of difference would sink out of sight. Bertha was not given to building air-castles, but for one moment, a vague beautiful one floated on her horizon.

She was more anxious to please Ruth than she had ever been to please any one but Roland, and she knew that what might suit his taste might be far from suiting his sister's. Her dress might seem too gay; and hurrying home, with a few quick but sure touches she removed all the red from her gown, smothered most of the white in black lace, and throwing off her hat, put on a quiet little black bonnet which was not nearly so becoming, but which might, she thought, be considered more lady-like. She knew that it was Mrs. Binney's reception day, and that Ruth would be sure to be there;

and she was glad not to have to knock at the door of the Wentworth house. To see Ruth alone might require some management, but she was not going to let a trifle stop her, even if the room were crowded.

Mrs. Binney's butler, who knew perfectly well who she was, would fain have asked her to wait in the hall; but there was something in her manner not to be withstood, and he showed her, as he would have done any other lady, across the wide hall toward the open door of the empty drawing-room.

"Whom shall I say, ma'am?" he inquired.

"You need not give my name. I want to see Miss Wentworth on business," said Bertha; and Thomas, good at need, suddenly threw open the library door. Doubtless Miss Ruth would rather have any business dealings with this person kept as quiet as possible.

It was early yet for callers, and Ruth had not come down, but she was dressed and ready, and in a moment she was in the room, all in a cloudy muslin robe of blush rose pink that matched the shade of her cheek. She, like Bertha, had dressed herself with care to please one person's eyes, but with a difference. During her few entering steps, Bertha could see the quick change of expression on her mobile face, from gracious welcome meant for some unknown lady, who might be a friend, to a look

of unrecognizing distance. She stopped short with a very slight bend of the head, and remained standing without asking her visitor to sit down.

"I 'm Bertha Chapman," began the other, without preface. She had meant to begin with some little apology for coming, but Ruth's manner seemed to force the words out of her mouth. Miss Wentworth bent her head again, and stood waiting for her to go on, and again she was obliged to plunge into her subject.

"I suppose—very likely—you 've heard your brother speak of me."

"I do not recall it at this moment."

"It does n't matter. I know him very well. I 've come to tell you"—a moment's pause—"that he 's got into a scrape—a worse one than ever—and unless something 's done, he won't get out of it in a hurry."

"Excuse me; but I think you must be misinformed; I have not heard of Mr. Roland Wentworth's being in any trouble."

"Well, the facts are these," said Bertha, drawing in a long breath, angry with herself for the abruptness of manner, which she knew must irritate her hearer, but which she had no power to check: "Roland 's gone and forged your father's name on a check. The bank would n't cash it, and your father says he won't pay the money; so——"

"I don't quite understand," said Ruth, with a bewildered look; "if the bank won't take it, why should he owe them money for it?" She thought within herself that if this young woman had come to beg money under false pretences, this question showed great sagacity on her own part.

"I guess you don't know much about such things. I 'm sorry to give you such a start, but I 'm in a hurry. It 's the man he paid the check to, Pete Finnegan, of course. He 's mad, and threatens to prosecute for the forgery if he don't get his money. I thought perhaps your father would pay part at any rate, and hush the matter up. I 've been to him. I won't say anything about that, only it 's no use asking him to do anything about it."

"You must excuse my father," said Ruth, amiably, "he is a little abrupt in manner sometimes, and he may have thought—you meant very well, I 'm sure, but don't you think it would be better to leave us to manage our own family affairs?"

"Good heavens! whose affair is this, if it is n't mine? I 'm going to marry your brother, so you may suppose it's something to me. If your father 'd have done anything, I would n't have minded the language he used."

"Dear me!" cried Ruth, shocked, but struggling not to show it; "I beg your pardon, but

are you quite sure of what you say? My brother does say very extraordinary things sometimes; he is far too unguarded in his use of language. Pray don't be angry with me, for I mean it kindly; but as you spoke of being engaged to him, I think I ought to tell you plainly that he is very apt to pay young ladies he meets attentions he means nothing by. Of course, I disapprove of it."

"We won't discuss whether or no Roland means to marry me; that is n't the point. I. mean to marry him, whether he goes to jail or not; but I don't suppose you want him to go if you can help it."

"What can I do?"

"Why, find out some way to get the cash. I thought if you and I once got together, we 'd manage it somehow."

"I would do what I could; but—are you sure that you are well informed about this? It seems—do excuse me—so very improbable. Why, I never even heard of the Mr.—Finnegan—to whom you allude. Roland has a way of saying things to frighten people, and papa, when he is out of temper with Roland—he sometimes is—might scold a little. I think I had better see Roland first about this, if you please, before I give you any money;" and again Ruth congratulated herself on her prudence.

"Well, you won't see Roland—not for a while. I know where he is, but the fewer others who do the better. It 's term time now, you see, and they 'll keep quiet for fear of frightening him off altogether, out of the State, but if he shows, Finnegan will put in a complaint, and they 'll arrest him in no time. I don't believe he 'll stand it long, and the only thing is to secure the money, and get Finnegan to give us the check for it, just as soon as we possibly can. I don't ask you to go it blind; some responsible person must see the check, and certify it. But bless you! they know all about it at the bank already; you can ask them, if you don't believe me."

"How much do you want?" asked Ruth, wavering in her distrust, as the image of that pillar of respectability, Silas Holmes, Esquire, cashier of the Wessex Bank, rose before her eyes, close-shaven and serious, as she was wont to see him in his pew at church.

"Three thousand dollars—that 's all."

"But I have n't such a sum—not a hundredth part of it," said Ruth, overwhelmed, and melting suddenly into tears; "I 'm sure I 'd do anything for Roland; but I have n't the money; unless I sell things," she added, nervously twisting her rings about.

"That 's nonsense; you never get anything for what you sell in a hurry; take all you got,

and more, too. No, I did n't suppose you had it, but you can surely get it. There 's your aunt, Mrs. Binney, she would give it to you if she knew; or perhaps you could get it out of her without telling her; that would be better. The more know it, the harder for Roland to keep straight further on."

"I don't think Mrs. Binney could give all that," said Ruth, her tears dried by disgust.

"Why, she must spend at least five times that every year!"

"She only has her income," said Ruth, driven by Bertha's persistence to explain, against the grain; "and she always lives pretty well up to that; she has so many calls in her position; and she has done a good deal for Roland already."

"Well, then, there 's your cousin, Mr. Binney."

"I am afraid Mr. Binney would be too apt to tell everybody, if he knew; he finds it difficult to keep anything to himself."

"Then don't tell him what it 's for—ask him for it for yourself."

"Oh, I could n't do that!"

"But something must be done if you don't want to have your brother in the State prison for seven years or so. He could never stand it; why, I do believe the being shut up would kill him, if there was n't anything else!"

"Do you really think there is any danger of it 's being as bad as that!"

Bertha looked despairingly at the clock, and felt that she must begin all over again. "I would n't ask you if there was any other way," she said.

"Oh, I could n't! you don't understand about these things! I 'd do anything for Roland, but how could I ask Mr. Binney, when—if—" she blushed painfully.

"I 'm very sorry for you, Miss Wentworth. I suppose you don't mean to marry Mr. Binney; I always told Roland I knew you never would; and of course it comes awful hard to ask anything of him. Why, there 's a man I know I 'm pretty sure would lend me the money, only as I don't mean ever to have him, I would n't have the face to ask him. I tell you this to show you that I know just how you feel. Maybe you 'll think it 's mean to put off on you what I would n't do myself; but the case is different. My man ain't one quarter as well able to afford it as Mr. Binney; and then, there 's Roland; just think what he 'd be if he borrowed money from a man that would lend it on his wife's account; I say lend, for I sha'n't rest, in any case, till every cent 's paid back, if I work fifty years for it. Now, Mr. Binney 's his own first cousin, and yours, too, and you can ask him on that score,

without his thinking he 's to get anything out of you for it."

"You have no right to say such things about me and Mr. Binney; I have said nothing to authorize you."

"Bless you! you meant that, did n't you? If you did n't, what in patience did you mean? I seem to keep offending you, Miss Wentworth, and I 'm sorry. Perhaps I could express myself better, if I was n't in such a tearing hurry. But here it is, half-past four, and nothing done. I tell you, if you can't ask Mr. Binney, I will. I 'll see if I can't get it out of him, one way or another."

"I am afraid you would find it of no use to try," sighed Ruth, now tearful again. "Mr. Binney is very generous about giving, but he always wants to know all about the object. He is n't likely to give, unless he does know, and if he does, as I said before, he will be very apt to tell others." She paused, thinking of Sarah Lewis.

"Perhaps Charley—Mr. Binney, I mean," said Bertha, hastily correcting herself, as she caught a look of drawing back upon Ruth's face, "may be willing to do something to please me; oh, of course he 'd be more likely to do it for you," again trying to avert displeasure at which she guessed, though she could not understand the cause; "only, if you

don't want to try, you can't blame me, you see! Is he in this house?" She turned toward the door with a sudden movement of relief.

"I don't know," said Ruth, without stirring.

"Can't you find out, please?"

"If you would only wait!"

"That 's impossible."

"I mean if you would wait a very few moments. I should like to consult a friend about this. I expect—the person I mean—to call here every moment. I have great confidence in—this person, and I will tell—everything—and then—there is nothing I won't give up for Roland; nothing I won't do for him; only I don't feel that I know enough about things to be able to decide without asking advice."

"Is it a man you want to speak to?" asked Bertha, and then after one look: "Oh, well, I am glad of it. A man may have some sense in his head, and if you mean William Noyes, he has plenty. I tell you, Miss Wentworth, I 'll go, and be back in an hour, or a little bit under, and you ask him to wait till I come. If he 'll take hold of this affair, there may be some hopes for us." She hastened off, only pausing to say, with emphasis, "Tell him everything, now, mind!"

Ruth, left alone, melted into a fresh flood of tears. "Poor dear Roland!" she thought,

"how very dreadful that he should have become the prey of a girl like that! If he has got into any money difficulties, I don't doubt she led him into them. She looks very extravagant—and so bold and forward." She looked round the room, which, like herself, seemed degraded by contact with such a visitor; and as to her expected call from William, to which she had looked forward with such delighted shy expectation, the idea of it now disgusted her. When he had met her at church, and had asked if she were still at home at her aunt's on Tuesdays, she had replied that she was, feeling that it was not her fault if Aunt Harriet, as she always said, preferred to go to Mr. Halstead's at the reception hour, thus saving time to write notes and attend to business directly after lunch. Neither was it her fault if Charley, who had been at home a week doing nothing, had engaged to go with a coaching party on Tuesday afternoon to Marblehead. She had tried her best to amuse him, had ridden with him and driven with him, with Sarah Lewis and young Bosworth, a male cousin of irreproachable manners and morals, always of the party, and she had asked the other pair in of evenings to play euchre, though she thought it silly; and if Charley had been bored and restless she could not help it. Perhaps he did not like Sarah and Reggie about

so much; but this she knew, she was not going to ride alone, or sit alone in the evenings with Charley, let him expect it ever so much. And what business had she to be so vain as to think he did? Very likely he missed Roland; he had certainly gone off in very low spirits, and almost cross for him, at being obliged to put up with Reggie Bosworth as coachman; also, as she could not help acknowledging, because she would not come with them. In vain she had explained that if she went, Cousin Rebecca must go, too, and it would not do for both to be away. Cousin Rebecca quite agreed, and then, considering propriety sufficiently satisfied by her being in the house, had retired to her room for a siesta, saying that she felt unusually tired —fatigue at nothing being her normal condition —she would take a longer nap than usual and would dear Ruth send her tea up at half-past five?—no earlier. In all this, Ruth was surely blameless; but if she had felt more pleasure than was proper or maidenly at the chance of a quiet uninterrupted talk with William Noyes, she atoned for it by her mortification, when the butler entered the library where she had remained, with, "Mr. Noyes is in the drawing-room, Miss Ruth."

"Please ask Mr. Noyes to come in here. He has come on business. And tell any one else who calls that we are not receiving this

afternoon. Miss Halstead has a headache, and does not wish to be disturbed—oh, except that young—lady who called before. If she comes again I will see her." By this time Ruth's face was scarlet. There was nothing so repugnant to her as the idea of the servants noticing anything that might lead them to suppose that the affairs of the family did not revolve with unvarying regularity at their proper high level, and though Thomas had known her as a baby, she felt more shame at his seeing her red eyelids and flushed cheeks than she did at showing these signs of emotion to William Noyes when he came in. She tried to speak, but her voice was choked, and her smile quivered painfully.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Wentworth!" he exclaimed, "is anything the matter? Has Mr. Halstead—is he much worse?"

"Oh, no!" said Ruth, in tones of utter despair, "he is much the same."

"Is any one else ill? Has anything happened? As you were kind enough to let me in, I hope I may be of some use to you."

"Oh, it is such a dreadful thing!" exclaimed Ruth, almost sobbing, "I cannot bear to tell you; and yet—I hope it may not be true, or at least, not all of it. I only wish I knew! and I thought, perhaps ——"

"Cannot you let me know what it is, and

perhaps I can help you in some way; and as she kept silence: "My dear Miss Wentworth —my dear Ruth—I cannot tell how you alarm and grieve me."

"It is—Roland—they say Roland has signed some paper with my father's name, and it is an order for three thousand dollars; and father says it is a forgery, and won't pay it; and if he does n't, the man who has it will have Roland taken up, and perhaps sent to prison."

The best place for him, thought William; but he kept his thoughts to himself, though he did not exert himself to the pitch of feigning astonishment. "Are you sure," he asked, "that things are as bad as that? How did you hear all this."

"Oh," said Ruth, coloring afresh, "in a very singular way. A young woman has been here who says she knows Roland—a Miss Chapman —and told me all about it. She says she must have the money, or the man will get out a something, I forget what. Do you think—don't you think, that perhaps she may have made it all up to get the money? I have heard of such things, and I think she seemed very like what such a person would be."

"What? Bertha Chapman! Oh, no! She 's a thoroughly good girl. She would n't tell anything but the truth, if she knew it; and she must have heard this from your brother."

"She says that he is—is engaged to her; but in that, I think, she must be mistaken. Roland has far too careless a way of talking with girls; but I don't believe he could seriously think of marrying any one like that—his taste is very fastidious."

"How Bertha Chapman can bring herself to have him!" said the hearer to himself; enraged with Roland—with himself—he could almost have said with Ruth; but one look at her sweet appealing face melted his indignation, and placed her again on her pedestal, a fairy princess under the sway of some malignant enchantment, whom it was his duty to carry off in triumph, past the most ferocious of dragons; and they were more so than he had pictured them. Roland, as a future brother-in-law, had never been an agreeable figure, and now loomed up as an appalling one. "What will he do when he 's older if he begins like this? The only hope is that he 'll drink himself to death;" and this hope was but a gloomy one. He sat silent and thoughtful, till Ruth raised her little head, with something of her usual stateliness.

"I am sorry," she said in courteous but chilling tones, "to have troubled you with our family affairs. Please forget what I have told you. I am sure I can trust you never to mention it."

"O Ruth, don't! Don't you know that your affairs are the most important things in this world to me? Don't you know that your joys and sorrows are mine? Trust me—only trust me through and through! Leave this to me, and it shall all be made right for you. You will—will you not?" and as Ruth looked up with a dawning gleam of faith and hope on her face, he drew nearer, with a rising glow of pride and strength on his own. His warm grasp was just closing over her little trembling but unresisting hand, when the door-bell rang loud and quick. Ruth snatched her hand away as if struck by lightning, and in a moment they were at a decorous distance again.

"It 's that Miss Chapman, I suppose," murmured Ruth; "she said she would come back. Indeed, we ought to be thinking of poor Roland now, and what can be done for him."

"Oh—yes—" responded the young man, feeling as if a bucket of ice water had been thrown over him. "I think I had better see her, and find out all she knows about it."

"Do you know her? She spoke as if you did."

"I used to know Bertha Chapman very well at school, though she was some years younger than I. I have n't seen much of her since; but I know she keeps a very good character."

"Oh, if you are only willing to talk to her,

you will soon find out all about it, I know. She speaks in a very odd way, but very likely she means well. She wanted me to ask Aunt Harriet or Charley for the money, but I don't think Aunt Harriet could give it. I could n't trouble Uncle James now; and I did n't feel as if I wanted to ask Charley."

"No, indeed!" said the young man, proudly, but thinking at the same time that when the case was properly presented to them, the Binneys would doubtless insist on contributing a fair proportion of the necessary amount.

"The—young lady—who called before is in the drawing-room, Miss Ruth," said Thomas.

"Ask her to come here, please," said Ruth, and as Bertha entered, "Will you not sit down?" went on the young hostess, half rising, and very slightly indicating a chair. "I think you know Mr. Noyes. Will you have some tea? It can be brought in directly."

"No, I don't want any tea. I s'pose you 've been telling Mr. Noyes all about what I told you."

"Not all, I am afraid. There was a great deal that I could hardly understand. But he is so kind as to say that he will attend to the business, if you will be so good as to tell him where to call."

"I should like," said William, "to know exactly what the facts are before I do anything about it."

Bertha, who had remained standing, drew a long breath, and suddenly sank down into the chair nearest her; Ruth, who had been politely standing too, sat down with more deliberation, and William drew his chair in between them, and took out his notebook. Nothing in his expression indicated that he was close to two beautiful girls, both pale now, but the dazzling marble of one fair cheek in strong contrast still to the soft white rose of the other. His quick but steady penetrating lawyer's gaze was for both alike. Bertha waited a moment to speak, but he did not hurry her, and at last she began slowly and carefully, holding herself well in check.

"I 've been suspecting for some time that there was something going wrong, and I guessed what it was—this was n't the first time—but I was n't certain for sure till Roland came in last night and told me he was in a fix—ruined, he called it. He did n't seem to mind it much; he was laughing all the time, but he always does that, the more the worse he feels, and I guess he felt scared. So, by coaxing him a bit, I got it out of him at last. He 'd been playing in Boston at Finnegan's——"

"Please give the exact address."

"Peter J. Finnegan, 901 Ash Street, Boston. You 've heard of him, have n't you?"

"Yes, I have heard of him."

"I was n't surprised to hear it, and I supposed he 'd come to the turn of luck at last, for as long as he was in the vein he 'd go on; so I teased him a bit more, and I got out at last that he 'd lost three thousand dollars. He 'd lost before and paid 'em. Mr. Binney gave him the money then; it was n't near so much, but I suppose they thought if they put the screw on again, they 'd get it in the same way. But somehow Roland did n't feel up to asking Mr. Binney again, and he—well, somehow he thought he 'd take a check out of his father's check-book, and sign it, and give it to 'em."

"What idea could he have had in doing such a thing?"

"Well," said Bertha, hesitating, "he thought —if they took it, Mr. Wentworth would get him out of the scrape somehow. I don't suppose he expected him to pay any money, but he knew they knew him, and thought perhaps he could make them hear reason—" Bertha stopped short, and after one glance at Ruth, who was looking, not at her, but at William, sent one look of appeal, with all her soul in it, at the young man, who nodded slightly, perfectly comprehending the situation. Roland must have supposed, he thought, that the old rascal had some hold on Finnegan. More likely Finnegan has on him! "Excuse me, Miss

Chapman," he said aloud, "if I cannot quite follow your meaning. Surely Roland must have known that Mr. Wentworth could never compromise matters with the bank."

"Bless you! he did n't dream of its ever getting to the bank! He said he did n't take Finnegan for such a fool as he turned out. He thought he 'd see directly that there was something shady about it, and carry it to Mr. Wentworth to find out. But it seems he did n't suspect a thing. Roland says it all comes from his fatal habit of doing things too well. You know Roland. No, Finnegan took it to the bank — I 'd ought to have mentioned that. And even there, being made out to Finnegan, they thought it was all right" (another pleading look at William); "but the amount was rather large, and though they had the sum to Mr. Wentworth's credit on hand, they thought it would be best before paying it out to send some one round and ask him—and he said right out that he never signed it, and would n't pay a cent on it; and of course, Roland can't."

"You know, Miss Chapman, that this is not a legal debt. Finnegan could not recover the money, even if Roland had it."

"Yes, I know that, and he knows it, too, of course, but he 's got mad now, and what he wants is revenge for this, and—other things. He swears he 'll make the whole thing public,

and disgrace the family. He 's going to lodge a complaint against Roland for forgery; he 's got the check, ready to produce, and more than one witness that saw it given him, beside."

"It would be the ruin of him too before he got through."

"He 's past caring for that."

"Where is Roland?"

"Perhaps I 'd better not tell. I can get at him any time you want him. But I don't see what you can do. What 's wanted is the money. If we had the three thousand dollars ready to pay down, it would n't matter how ugly Finnegan chose to be. I went to Mr. Wentworth to-day to see if he would do anything; he did n't seem disposed to."

Told her to go to the devil, probably, thought William.

"But I 've no doubt," resumed Bertha, "that if the money were got together without his having to give any, he 'd own the signature, and then Finnegan would n't have any case, and might be glad enough to give up the check; and the people at the bank will keep quiet enough. That 's their way, you know. But the time 's short, and it 's a good deal to raise."

William looked with some pitying admiration at Bertha as she stopped talking, and rapidly passed her handkerchief over her parched lips

and aching throat. She was a handsome girl, and a good girl, and it was a thousand pities she should be thrown away on that young scamp; and yet, as his eye passed on and settled on Ruth's face, with what relief did he hail on it the puzzled innocent gaze of a child who is trying to understand a story utterly beyond its comprehension. Here was the maid, the wife, for him. He could never have borne to love one who knew the evils of the world, and here was one who had grown up among them without knowing that such things were, and who, he pledged his faith and truth, should never learn. Perhaps his feelings spoke more strongly from his face than his self-control usually allowed, for Bertha smiled, a little sadly, and he hastened to say:

"A man will give a good deal for revenge sometimes, but I think he will as a rule take cash down for it, even if less than he asks. I will just step round to the bank and have a word or two with Mr. Holmes, and then I 'll run up to town the first thing to-morrow morning and see Finnegan. Probably he has cooled down a little by this time, and when I have represented the case, I have no doubt I can induce him to accept a compromise; half, say, or two thirds of the sum; and I will advance the amount till we see what Roland's friends are willing to do."

"Well, you *are* good!" cried Bertha. Ruth said nothing, but she gave William a shy sweet smile that faintly showed one of her dimples, and then made a very slight movement of release, which Bertha was quick to catch. "I 've got to be going," she said.

"Thank you so much for coming," said Ruth, with the access of cordiality which an unwelcome visitor earns when she is unmistakably about to take herself off; "it was so good in you. I do not think there is any need for you to take any further trouble about the matter, since Mr. Noyes is so kind as to say he will settle it."

"You shall hear from me as soon as I have anything to tell," said William.

"Thank you," said Bertha, very low. She looked at Miss Wentworth, and made a little motion as if to hold out her hand; but Ruth bowed without noticing it, and Bertha turned toward the door, which William opened for her, and then accompanied her across the hall. "You are very good," she repeated, warmly, when she found herself alone with him. "I hope you 'll have your reward. I 'm sure you deserve it." She was gone with the words, and he hastened back with: "Good-bye, my own, my dearest Ruth! I hate to leave you, but I must hurry off, if I am to get through with this business in time."

"You *are* good," whispered Ruth; "I could n't say anything before that Miss Chapman, but you must n't think I don't understand how very good you are to poor Roland. Only, you ought not to do so much; he ought not to take it from you." She colored all over, and tears of shame were in her eyes.

"We can do it, and he can take it from us," said William; and another sweet look thanked him. "I shall not call it any more than a loan," he continued. "We 'll see if Roland won't pay it off himself."

"I am sure he will," she murmured, and the lover held his peace. "I know he will be so very grateful to you!" she went on; "and if we can only persuade him to do right, and settle down, and give up the idea of marrying that dreadful girl——"

"She is a very good girl," persisted William, stoutly, "though of course not the kind of girl you are accustomed to."

"I am sure you can't be accustomed to her either. I know your mother would never know any such people. She is so thoroughly refined herself."

"She is full of you now. I wish I had time to tell you all the things she said of you, after she came home. Another time—" He took Ruth's hand again, and held it with a lingering pressure. Perhaps he might have made more

of his two minutes, but she drew hastily back from his clasp, and he let her go. She waited till the door closed behind him, and then flew into the dining-room, from the bow window of which she could, unseen herself, watch him down the street, and revel in the well-knit straightness of his active figure, and the elastic firmness of his tread. No knight of romance, thought she, could have looked more noble. But he turned back to look too, and, blushing and alarmed, though no glance could have pierced the thick curtains through whose tiniest parting crevice she was peeping, she flew upstairs, blaming herself for being so much happier than she ought.

XVI

A BRIDE IN BLACK

"YOUNG'S HOTEL, BOSTON, June —, 189–

"MY DEAR MISS WENTWORTH:

"I am happy to say that the little business which you were so good as to entrust to me is finally settled, and that there can be no more trouble about it. I hope soon to have the pleasure of seeing you again, and am,

"Yours very sincerely,

"WILLIAM NOYES."

And under the same address:

"MY DEAR MISS CHAPMAN:

"I have burned the paper with my own hands. Its price was $1500 in cash. Your friend may show himself now, the sooner the better. I hope you may have no more trouble, and am,

"Yours with respectful regards,

"WILLIAM NOYES."

"Well, Bill is a clever fellow!" was Roland's comment, as he read the latter note. "Trust him for getting a good discount when his own

pocket is in question." He was lounging in an armchair in the second-floor back room of Mrs. Van Winkle's house, a room occasionally occupied by boarders when she could get them, and which, fortunately happening to be vacant just then, had been appropriated by Bertha for Roland's use. She knew he could not stay there long without its becoming known; but the necessity was a pressing one, and, as things had turned out, the time was sufficient. He looked as if he had gone through a slight illness, and the lines of his face were settling when at rest into a sort of tension, but his manner was careless as ever. It jarred on Bertha, weak as she was with the reaction that follows sudden relief, and she said with more sharpness in her tone than he had ever heard before:

"You 'll pay him, of course."

"I shall pay him—when I 'm ready. He must take my influence with Ruth for a good part of it."

"That 's absurd. He 'll have her, influence or no influence. I 've seen 'em."

"Well, then, it will all be in the family, anyhow," drawled Roland, yawning.

"Look here, Roland," cried Bertha, turning suddenly round on him, "there 's got to be an end of this. I 'm not going through what I 've gone through these last four days again. I

can't trust you out of my sight. You 've got to marry me."

"Indeed!"

"Just as soon as you can—to-day, if it 's not too late. Come along—we 'll go to the City Hall and see if we can get the papers, and then go and have Dr. Bowers do it, if he 's in. If he 's out, we 'll find somebody else"; and as Roland's reply lingered: "Come now—or never come here any more."

"Well, don't get into a fury about it. I 've no objection. Only, if you are going, you 'd better put on your hat first."

Bertha rushed into the next room, threw on her hat without even a look at the mirror, and rushed back, drawing on her long gloves.

"If your being all in black brings us bad luck, you need n't blame me," he began. "Good Lord, Bertie, what a beauty you are! Give me one kiss—just one." But Bertha quickly lowered her head, and he could only press his lips to the ripe swelling curve of her throat just below the ear. "To think of your proposing at last! I believe the women would all come to it, if we let 'em alone. If you were n't so enchanting all over, you 'd drive me to refuse you."

"There are other reasons," said Bertha; "your father said such things. I can't have it go on."

"He can be a very unpleasant old party when he 's a mind to. Poor Bertie! he cut up rough, did he? I could have told you you 'd only waste your time going to him." They had gone downstairs while talking, and reached the street without meeting any one but the little maid, at sight of whom Bertha paused to say in a low tone: "Perhaps I sha'n't be home to-night, Net. Tell mother what I said, if I 'm not. Good-bye!" and as the girl stood staring at her with understanding dawning on a face of open-eyed alarm, she stooped and kissed her on the cheek. Nettie's face contracted, and her mouth opened with what would have been a howl of despair but for a warning shake of Bertha's head, when she broke into a flood of tears instead.

"What made you kiss that nasty little beggar?" asked Roland, as the door closed; "I won't kiss you till after we are married, for that."

Bertha had no answer for him. She scarcely heard him. She was fighting rising throbs of shame and mortification that came near choking her, every time she caught herself trying to check her hurrying tread to keep step with Roland's lazy pace. But when they reached the great front entrance of the City Hall there was no longer any need for this. A heavy surging roar sounded in her ears, and her jour-

ney's goal swam before her eyes. Her hope, life itself, seemed slipping from her. She paused a moment; it seemed an hour.

Now it was Roland's turn to pass her arm through his, and to draw her on with a sudden strength which doubled all she could have put forth at her strongest; and they entered the city clerk's office in the proper order. He placed her on a seat with the most assiduous courtesy, and then coolly strolled up to the desk, asked for the papers, and, with an occasional reference to her, intentions of marriage were filed between Roland Wentworth, single, white, aged twenty-four, born in Bethel, Massachusetts, son of Ralph Wentworth and Frances Halstead; and Bertha Vernona Chapman, single, white, aged twenty two, born in Aspasia, New York, daughter of Artemas Newell Chapman and Czarina Kittie Meacom.

Many curious glances were cast by the city clerk the while. It was to the old man like reading some exciting chapter in a novel; only it was so tantalizing not to know exactly what came before, or to be able to guess what was coming after. Like every man in Bethel he knew Roland Wentworth by speech, and Bertha Chapman by sight; and he would have ventured on some harmless joke, but that Roland's immovable grave dignity forbade. The bridegroom's demeanor to his bride at the

close of the proceedings was even more impressive than at the beginning. He held the door open for her to pass through as reverently as if she were a queen, and followed her at the respectful distance of a gentleman usher. She only acknowledged his courtesies with a slight stately inclination of her head as she swept past; but thoughts of long ago were striving at her heart that had never risen there since her love had been won by Roland's boyish protection and homage. "Yes, I do love you —love you — love you —" she was saying mutely; "I always — always shall; but you might have made it a great deal harder. Whatever you may ever do, or be, I 'll remember this!"

"Where shall we go now?" Roland was saying; "I believe it is the lady's privilege to arrange the rest of the programme on these occasions."

"We 'll go and see if Dr. Bowers is in."

"Do you want any one — any of your family?"

"No!" said Bertha, decidedly; "thank you," she added, recollecting that she must begin to train herself in the manners proper to a Wentworth.

Dr. Bowers was at home. He was well accustomed to preforming the sacred rites in his front parlor for couples of the social level

which considers it the proper thing to "go off and get married." But he too was conscious that this was an occasion of more than common account. Bertha, with such of her brothers as she could get into proper shape on Sundays, had long attended his church, with, at first, but scanty encouragement from him. The "Second Church," so called in order of seniority in the town, had, like its predecessor, and most of the other old New England churches, taken the Unitarian side in "the great split of '37." If it lacked the fine aristocratic flavor of the First, it was still eminently respectable, and it is probable that none but tax-paying citizens of good repute and their families attended its services. There was no place in its social fabric for a girl like Bertha. Had her name only been Carneiro or Rosetti, and her beauty blossomed in the fitting atmosphere of the Portuguese or Italian colonies which are fast creeping into Wessex County towns, she would have presented a much easier problem. Her spiritual wants would have been sedulously looked after by some olive-hued padre, and if she had come to any of the church people to ask for cold victuals, or old clothes, or work, a dozen societies would have taken up her case at once. But she would pay punctually for her sittings, and would come regularly to church, so over-dressed, and people would

look at her so, and there was always the chance of some disgraceful exposure of herself, or her mother, or some of their very shady connections. The worthy doctor could not expect any of the ladies of his parish to extend any civilities to her, and really wished, sometimes, that she would stay away.

But as the years rolled on there was something in the always serious, sometimes wistful gaze of the young face so steadily fixed on his that struck painfully home to his heart, and struck to his wife's heart too, woman though she was. Report had been busy enough with Bertha's name, and even the doctor and Mrs. Bowers had heard various stories in which it was joined with Roland Wentworth's. But when they saw her there was something in her eyes which made them ashamed of having heard the stories. They agreed in private that she could not know what young Wentworth really was, and that something ought to be done for her, and Dr. Bowers had gone so far as to say that he would consult one of the Manninghams about it. But time slips more rapidly by at two-and-sixty than at two-and-twenty; it only seemed a day or two since he had expressed the intention, and here stood the young couple before him, having taken things into their own hands. Dr. Bowers did not see that he could do anything in the mat-

ter now. Both parties were of age. It was far from probable that the Wentworths and Binneys would like the match; but he did not know them well enough to feel it necessary to expostulate on their account; indeed, no one who knew Ralph Wentworth at all was likely to feel any regret at an occurrence which might occasion him mortification. Only for Bertha's sake did he feel that some effort should be made — but what? This marriage might be advantageous to her present reputation; again, it might ensure her future misery. He had only time for one hurried question, while Roland was making himself agreeable to Mrs. Bowers and her sister, who had come in to act as witnesses.

"My dear, do you think that this young man will make you a good husband?"

"I don't know," said Bertha; "but that 's not the question; I mean to make him a good wife."

Her tone admitted of no further inquiries; Dr. Bowers felt that it was his duty to extend them to the bridegroom; but Roland's calm imperturbable demeanor afforded no opening. He could only sigh and determine to make his extemporized service as impressive as possible. He gave the young couple a prefatory address of solemn admonition, and prayed, it might be said, with unction. But here, too, he was

overtopped by Roland, who made his responses with the chastened fervor that Sir Galahad might have displayed on like occasion, and regarded his bride with the sublimated devotion of a worshipper at the Virgin's altar. Bertha's voice was faint, and she looked very white, but her pallor enhanced the statuesque outline of her features, and the lustrous darkness of her eyes. The spectators agreed that in all his experience dear Richard had never married so handsome a couple, and that his service deserved far better surroundings. It was a shame it was not a proper wedding in church, with music and flowers, and white satin and bridesmaids, and a crowd to see it.

Bertha had had her dreams of what her wedding would be like. They were very modest ones, but still there had been in them some of the pomp and circumstance that women love so much to look forward to and back upon for their marriage day. They vanished at once and forever as she drew up her black skirt from the dust while descending Dr. Bowers's doorsteps. The immediate necessity of deciding where she and her husband were to be housed that night was pressing; but something else must be thought of first.

"Roland," she said, "I think before we do anything else I must step round and speak to Mr. Manningham. You see they gave me this

afternoon as a special favor; yesterday was my real day out; and I think I ought to let them know directly what 's happened; it would n't be fair not to."

"I don't want to go there; can't you write them a note?"

"No, I don't think that would be right. They 've been very kind to me."

"Well, anything for peace. I 'll wait outside a quarter of an hour; no more. Will that do to make your adieux to old Peter?"

"But, Roland, I was thinking if they 'd keep me—even for the present—I get ten dollars a week there, and that would pay our board till you get something to do."

"Board? What kind of board?—with your mother and Smutty? No, thank you! And do you suppose I 'm going to have my wife behind their counter? I 'd rather take to the hand-organ and monkey business."

"Well," acquiesced Bertha; "I don't believe they 'd have kept me, anyhow."

"Here we are; don't you want me to come in and help you break it? In case the old fellow has a fit, I might be useful."

"No, indeed!" said Bertha, hastily vanishing into the shop, where her entrance at that hour seemed to rouse some anxiety in sellers and buyers.

"Mr. Manningham," she asked hurriedly,

"may I have a few words with you in private?" Both brothers were meant, though her words were directly addressed to one, and both were quick to respond.

"Step right in here," said Joseph Manningham, indicating an inner office sacred to the firm, while Peter followed in silence. "Sit down, will you?" he went on, as he looked at her, but Bertha remained standing. "I think I ought to let you know," she said, slowly, but without hesitation, "that I was married this afternoon to Mr. Roland Wentworth."

Peter and Joseph were standing on opposite sides of the long table in the middle of the room, and she had carefully chosen a place that brought her face to face with the latter, to whom she directed her words, though without raising her eyes to him, while her back was turned on his brother; yet by a subtle sense she saw, while she made her confession, Peter's face grow pale, and felt the stab each word inflicted.

"This is rather sudden," said Joseph, carefully weighing his words, and taking good care not to look at Peter.

"I know it. I 'm real sorry, but I could n't help it. I 've been engaged to Mr. Wentworth some time, but I never expected to be married so soon. But things came about so that we thought we 'd better." She paused, but the

others said nothing, and she resumed: "Mr. Wentworth don't want me to tend store any more, and I suppose you would n't want me either, now."

"I hardly think it would be best," said Joseph.

"I told him you 'd feel so. I do hope it won't give you too much trouble. I rather think Maggie can take my place pretty well if she 'll try, and then there 's Carry Kinnicutt. I guess she knows the run of things. We 've had her in the holidays once or twice, you know; and she told me the other day she wanted some regular place awfully, since the old man broke down; he don't do any work to speak of now; if you 'd try her, I 'm sure she 'd do her best to give satisfaction."

"Thank you; I 'll see about it."

"There 's a few things of mine here; I won't stop for 'em now. I 'll send for 'em in a few days."

"Yes—where are you going to be?"

"I don't know yet."

Joseph Manningham was an unselfish man, and had been considering the intelligence he had just heard with a view to the effect on his brother, which quite shut out every minor consideration of the injury to the firm's business, and his own inconvenience and discomfort. But these last words suddenly brought to his

mind the consciousness that the startling event of the day was, after all, of most importance to the girl at his side, with her life still so long before her, and he reproached himself, as he said with the genuine fatherly ring in his voice: "Bertha, I do hope this is all right for you?"

"Thank you."

"Where were you married?"

"Dr. Bowers married us, at his own house. I 've got the certificate, all right," replied Bertha, by no means offended.

"Mr. Wentworth's family—will they take you in?"

"I don't know. I guess they will when they 've got over being a little mad at first."

"I wish you had consulted me. I might have done something. Cannot I now?"

"I don't see as you can, but I 'm much obliged to you, Mr. Manningham. You 've been real good to me, and it seems as if I 'd been ungrateful; but I did n't mean it — I did n't, indeed."

"I 'm sure you did not."

An awkward pause ensued, while Joseph opened his pocketbook, and "Here 's your week's salary," he said; and as she would have put part of it back: "No, indeed! take it all, take it all."

"Thank you; I guess I must go now, for Mr. Wentworth 's waiting for me. Good-bye,

and thank you ever so much for not being mad with me."

She held out her hand to Joseph Manningham, and then, turning sharp round, laid it for one instant in his brother's. She could not think of anything to say to Peter, but through her downcast eyelashes she caught a look from him which brought burning blushes to her cheeks, and she said quickly: "I 've loved him ever since I was twelve years old."

"If you should ever need a friend—" began Peter; but he could not finish the sentence, and in another moment she had gone, and the sharp click of the door-latch struck home the conviction that she would never return. Both men stood silent for a moment as if a new-made deathbed stretched between them.

"Peter," said Joseph, in a few moments, "don't stay late this afternoon, if you don't want to. I can get along as well as not with the shutting up."

"Thank you, Joseph. I 'd just as soon stay. There 's nothing to go home for."

Bertha hurried through the shop and out into the street with the sensation of having been run over—a feeling of being in pieces, and some of them missing, she could not exactly tell which. She knew that a tribute of regret was due from her to her late employers, and resolved that she would pay it in full.

when she could do so with safety; but it was nearly six o'clock now, and Roland must be tired of waiting; so she lightly tripped across the street to where he stood contemplating, with every symptom of absorbed interest, last week's illustrated newspapers, growing shop-worn in the window of a sleepy little book stall.

"I 'm so sorry I 've kept you waiting so long," she said breathless.

"Pray don't mention it, my adored one. I 've been taking a good lesson in the duties of a husband—not that I need it, I assure you. I 'm the best broken-in man going—your lovely sister-in-law has taken care of that;" and as she looked puzzled: "You have n't taken your new relations into consideration yet, hey, Mrs. Wentworth?"

"No—I shall wait till they take me up; there are two sides to that question."

"So there are to every question; why, your relations are my relations now, are they not? A sweet set! You took me so by surprise, Bertie, that I never considered the fact that I was saddling myself with a mother-in-law. I suppose there is no need of extending the filial relation to Smutty."

"I hope you won't mind them too much," said Bertha; "I 'll try to manage. I 'd like to look a little after the boys, now and then, and

mother 'll have to come and see us, I suppose —that 's only fair."

"I shall be happy to have Mrs. Smutt call as often as propriety demands. The only question is—where?"

Bertha was silent. She had two weeks' wages in her pocket, and a few pence beside; and enough in the savings-bank to pay their board somewhere for a month or so. If Roland would only go to her mother's for the present—that would be cheaper than anywhere else. I could fix up my room real nice, she thought; and we could have the parlor to ourselves, most all the time; but I suppose he would n't hear of such a thing. She looked at Roland, who stood waiting for her answer as carelessly as if the world were theirs to choose from, and could not but allow that her plan was an impossible one. Her thoughts were probably reflected in her face, for he said with an amused smile: "If you will be satisfied to leave that part of the business to the head of the family—I believe that is the usual custom."

Bertha could only follow his lead, looking submissive, but feeling inwardly anxious. He would surely go to some horrid expensive place, if, indeed, any such place in respectable Bethel would receive them of a sudden. There were hotels, but Roland, she knew, despised

them, and a Boston one would beggar them in a week. However, he was not going in the direction of the railway station; just the contrary; and in a few moments she found herself ascending the steps of Wentworth House by his side. She had dreamed of this, and had always thought the dream a wild one; yet it seemed real compared to the reality. But his accustomed hand turned the latch-key, the heavy door opened inward, and closed on them inside. They crossed the great cool, darkening hall, where long sunset rays and sweet summer scents stole across from far-off open doors and windows. Roland pushed a half-closed door wide open into the spacious southwest parlor, where all was light and warmth; a stately old wainscoted room, with shining floor and cross-beamed ceiling, and stately old furniture in keeping, yet not so much as to hide its fine proportions, and the beautiful carving on panels and pillars. There were flowers all about it, and a great blaze of them showed through the bow-window toward the garden, of which a sash stood open, though the day was cool and a spark of fire was smouldering on the hearth. In the corner between them stood the tea-table, with tea things that had long grown cold, but which no one had ventured to remove and risk disturbing Mr. Wentworth, who sat in his armchair with his head

thrown back in a nap, and the evening paper dropping from his hand. Beyond him, on the low window seat, nestled among a pile of cushions, the slender form of a young girl, and the lovely lines of her profile, bent over a book, stood out clear against the close bars of the small-paned window, and the green background of tall shrubs beyond. Nothing could be in more perfect keeping as a piece of domestic art than the Wentworth interior.

XVII

FATHER AND SON

THE entrance of the young couple woke up Mr. Wentworth, who raised his head and blinked sleepily at them for a moment, while he fumbled for his eyeglasses; it roused Ruth, who was on her feet in a minute, with her hand extended, and a welcome ready on her lips.

"Allow me," said Roland in his suavest voice, "to introduce Mrs. Roland Wentworth."

"The devil!" cried his father. Ruth had no words, but she grew pale, as she still stood with parted lips and hand extended.

"You expressed a wish, I believe," went on Roland to the former, "to improve your acquaintance with this young lady. She will be very happy—that is, of course, in the character of your daughter."

The utter bewilderment of both the listeners' faces increased with this explanation. Bertha's overwrought nerves found relief in a laugh; no vulgar peal of fun, but a musical little ring that

seemed to tell of triumph too complete to be scornful. It damned her at once and forever with Ruth, but somehow it chimed in with Mr. Wentworth's mood. "Well!" he muttered, turning on her, "if you see anything to laugh at in this, I should like to know what it is."

"It 's better to laugh than to cry, I suppose," said Bertha.

"You show some spirit, my young lady. I hope you won't have to sing another tune before this time to-morrow."

"Oh, if you allude to our little misunderstanding," said Roland, "that has been attended to. You need have no apprehension of a constable disturbing your morning nap. If there had been I should n't have come here for my honeymoon. We 've come to stay, if it 's the same to you. Don't mind it so much, Ruthie, darling," he added, with a caressing touch to his sister's cheek, as she made an aimless movement to assure herself that she was awake; "don't mind it if the tea *is* cold. It 's our own fault for coming so late, and we can wait for dinner."

Mr. Wentworth gave one look at Bertha, who returned it with a slight smile of careless ease. "How long have you been married?" he asked.

"Just one hour," replied his son.

"Where?"

"At Dr. Bowers's own house. You must excuse us for not having sent you an invitation. I can only refer you to Mrs. Wentworth."

"Well, since you 're here, I suppose you must stay," said Wentworth, conscious of a thrill of agreeable excitement every time he looked at the self-possessed, superior bearing of his handsome daughter-in-law.

"Very kind of you, I 'm sure," said Roland, throwing himself into his own special armchair, a companion to his father's, and taking up the dropped newspaper. "Come, Ruth, my precious, take Bertie up-stairs to take off her hat, there 's a good child."

Ruth, who had been standing in a trance of what might fairly be described as horror, started, but came forward. She longed to throw off the degrading office on one of the maids, but felt unequal even to the slightest explanation at the moment. She did not know much about the vicious of her own sex, but she could hardly imagine that any one of them could fall to any lower depths than Bertha had. To come there under such circumstances was an impropriety too great to be comprehended. Roland was thoughtless, as men usually are, but he knew better, and doubtless this creature had put him up to the

intrusion. Her utter shamelessness indicated as much. Why, she ought to be ashamed even to look one of the family in the face! All this while the two girls were going up the wide staircase side by side.

"We 'll take Roland's room, wherever it is," said Mrs. Roland; "I don't want to put you out." She thought that Miss Wentworth might deem it necessary to open the best spare room. Ruth tried not to look her repugnance as she threw back the door of her brother's room, one of the very pleasantest of the great square chambers of Wentworth House, and with dressing-rooms and closets appertaining thereto large enough for rooms themselves. It seemed to her not at all the thing for a bride to take up her abode in an atmosphere so redolent of young bachelorhood, but she had nothing to oppose, and this girl doubtless knew no scruples. Bertha, indeed, had never been in such an apartment before. She had been prepared to find those downstairs a great deal finer, though she had the good taste to like them better as they were; but that any human being, especially any young man, could live in so luxurious a nest as this, was a revelation to her. The background was in the common style of the house—old mahogany furniture, and quaint papers and chintzes carefully chosen to correspond; but it was lost

under a crowd of personal belongings, and *bric-à-brac* without end, the votive offerings of Roland's female adorers to their idol, who in return had covered his walls and tables with their photographs, arranged with great impartiality, his great-aunts and elderly maiden cousins alternating with stars of the stage. Ruth had never minutely examined these portraits, and rather disapproved of their exhibition, which she regarded as one of the "ways" of a young man, which he left off when he married some nice girl. But Bertha scrutinized them with keen interest. She looked long at a picture which hung close by the bed, which must be Roland's mother, and which, though only enlarged from an old daguerrotype, successfully contested the prize of beauty with an exquisite pastel of her daughter, beneath. She would have said something, but her silent companion gave no encouragement; and the next moment she was dimpling with irresistible laughter at discovering herself and Mrs. Tom Silloway amiably smiling at each other in the same double frame. "That is a little too much!" she murmured under her breath; "but you 've got to make tracks, old lady, and pretty smart, I can tell you!"

"I beg your pardon?" said Ruth.

"Oh, nothing—nothing, thank you," said Bertha, starting.

"Can I get you anything?" went on Ruth, with a glance as if a dressing-case of some sort might yet evolve itself out of Bertha's empty hands. But Bertha had none.

"No, thank you," she repeated, and coolly taking up one of Roland's own ivory-backed brushes gave a few touches to her thick shining locks. A hundred other costly trifles lay on the toilet table, many for uses to her quite unknown.

Bertha's expectations pictured her wedded bliss as of a chequered character; but she was always able to snatch what lesser gratifications she could as she went along; and she could have enjoyed this part of her home-coming but for Miss Wentworth standing by, a statue colder than marble. As it was, she cut it short with a brief "I 'm ready now," and turned to leave the room, not without setting things straight on the toilet table, and giving a few energetic pulls and pinches to the careless heap of cushions on the lounge as she passed. Things were apt to be in elegant disorder at Wentworth House, especially in Roland's premises, but Bertha did not know that this was the proper thing, and Ruth did not know whether her ignorance or impertinence were most at fault. They walked down-stairs, and dinner was announced, and Mr. Wentworth gave his arm to Bertha, and Roland to

his sister, all exactly according to etiquette; and as they entered the dining-room Roland said to the parlor-maid, "Julia, this is Mrs. Wentworth," and Julia, who knew half the family affairs, and was keenly curious about the other half, was likewise perfect in her part, and bowed respectfully as she said, "I wish you joy, I 'm sure, Mr. Roland, and you too, ma'am." The men laughed and talked at dinner as if nothing unusual had happened, and the ladies made the proper speeches, very much as if they had learned them by heart. "Come and have a cigar," said Roland, clapping his father on the shoulder as they rose.

Ruth would have followed the pair into Mr. Wentworth's den, which they oddly seemed to prefer to the garden porch on that sweet summer evening; but Bertha stopped her with a gesture. "If you don't mind waiting," she said, "I guess Roland wants to have a talk with your father."

Ruth, determined to bear with any impertinence, walked back to the parlor, where lamps were now lighted, and drew up her chair to the table. "We 've got to have something settled, you know, if we 're going to stay on here," continued her sister-in-law.

Ruth made no reply.

"I 'm sorry—very sorry, to have it come on

you so sudden," went on Bertha. "I could n't help it. I 'll try and not be any more trouble to you than I can help, Miss Wentworth—Ruth, I mean; I would n't have married Roland if I had n't felt sure it was the best thing for him. I want you to know that."

"No doubt," said Ruth, determined to accept no confidences. "I hope you are comfortable? Would you like anything to read? There are some of the last English papers—the *Graphic* and *London Illustrated*," she went on, carefully selecting pictorial literature as best suited to her sister-in-law's capacity; "and perhaps you will excuse me if I go on with my book; I am very much interested in it."

"Oh, certainly!" said Bertha, and drew one of the papers toward her. Ruth kept her eyes fixed on her book, turning leaf after leaf at due intervals, though she did not take in a word. Bertha, with no pretence at reading, looked straight over the outside page of her paper at the smouldering logs in the fireplace. The hour, which was one of torture to Ruth, was a welcome interval of rest to her.

"So you 've married that girl at last?" were Ralph Wentworth's first words when alone with his son; "I thought you had more sense."

"She married me," replied the younger man, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"She had good reasons, doubtless," said the father, with a responsive shrug.

"Excuse me, sir, but I shall be obliged to knock any man down who says such a thing, or even hints at it, and I should be sorry to begin with you. It would be awkward, if we 're going to live with you."

"If you 're really married, I suppose you must take that line."

"Oh, we 're married fast enough; trust my wife for that. I don't feel any necessity of standing up for her; she can take her own part; but I 've some regard for my own character. She 's a clever girl. With half the time and trouble I spent on her, I could have had any of 'em—Sarah Lewis—Rosie Robbins—they 're all alike at bottom."

Wentworth assented with a sneer.

"No, it was about this check business—she got a hold on me, and she would n't let me off."

"And, pray, how was that disposed of?"

"You need n't worry; it 's settled."

"How?"

"It 's bought and burned; by some one I know. I 'm not at liberty to give you his name."

"Binney, I suppose. Well, if he chooses to scatter his money that way, it 's a pity you can't get more out of him."

"It was n't Charley; it 's no one you know.

He bought it cheap—cash down—and he 'll wait for his money."

"Friend of your wife's, eh? I begin to understand the situation."

"When I talked about knocking down, I meant it; do you understand that?"

"Say acquaintance, then; I suppose I may go as far as that?"

"As you please."

"And how do you propose to live?"

"With your help, I think it can be managed."

"If you think you 've any claims on me ——"

"I suppose you may as well go on settling my bills when you feel like it; you 're never in a hurry, as it is."

"Bills? Bills for a wife and half a dozen children!"

"My wife will pay her own, if you 'll let her. Look here! we 've gone on here for years, cheated and swindled right and left. I don't suppose there 's one of our old set of servants that does n't support a family out of us. Ruth 's afraid of 'em, and she 's away half the time as it is, and will soon go off for good. Bertha can manage anybody; you 'll find that out. Let her take the housekeeping, and your bills, with her expenses thrown in, will be half what they are now, and you 'll be saved no

end of trouble beside. And as to my family—are you not a little premature?"

Mr. Wentworth laughed, and in this easy fashion the battle was won. He was relieved of a great anxiety, and was disposed to be complaisant. What capacity for affection there was in him was all for Roland. His son was always provoking him, and he would fly out at him, rave or swear at or against him, and consign him to a jail fifty times over, while yet he loved him incalculably more than the daughter who gave him no trouble and little expense, and with whose doings he rarely concerned himself enough to be angry. Roland's society amused him, and there was very little else that did. The loss of it was a deprivation, and this was his chief concern in the matter. Then Bertha's beauty and lively manner promised some excitement to his jaded senses. It seemed likely to save some trouble to have her manage his establishment. Ruth's control over it was merely nominal; the real head, the old cook, grew more and more of a tyrant, and Bertha, as mistress, sounded like a refreshing novelty. He reserved to himself the right to fly out at his new housekeeper when the humor took him; she was young and inexperienced, and a duet with her would be more amusing than when Hannah took the other part, for in the depths of his secret soul

the ferocious Wentworth himself was afraid of Hannah. He made no further objection than a careless suggestion that the girls might not agree, to which Roland as carelessly replied that he would take care of that; and the cigars being smoked out, but little more was said.

Roland, returning triumphant to the parlor, bent over his wife's shoulder and kissed her cheek: "It's all right, my darling; I knew it would be. Now, all you have to do is to make yourself at home." He had another kiss for his sister as he concluded, but it was no atonement for his wife's offences, though it brought tears to Ruth's eyes. She thought she had borne enough for once. She did not deem it necessary to extend any further civilities to the newly married pair. Roland was quite equal to the task of making himself and his bride comfortable, even if Bertha had possessed less assurance. She slipped out of the room with a cool "good-night" to the company in general, for she could not bring herself to address Bertha in particular. Bertha smiled and nodded easily enough; but as Roland, following Ruth's motion, drew her arm through his, he felt her hand as cold as ice. "Scared, are you?" he said, half pitying, half amused. "Oh, come now! there's no occasion for that."

XVIII

AKIN BY MARRIAGE

RUTH, who had cried herself to sleep, rose with a sensation of languor unusual in her healthy young frame, and came down late, partly because she was determined to avoid the chance of any *tête-à-tête*, and partly because, always slow in dressing, it was doubly impossible for her to suit herself this morning. The experience of waking to realize that a beloved presence has gone from the house is sad and common enough; but the realization that an unwelcome presence has come has its own peculiar hardships. Wentworth House seemed permeated with a sense of Bertha, so strong that it hardly needed the sight of her, bright and blooming as the morning, to enforce it. Although breakfast had not fairly begun, she had already taken up her station behind the coffee urn, while Mr. Wentworth and Roland were turning over the newspapers at the window. "Oh, Ruth," said her father, absently and without raising his eyes, "as

Mrs. Wentworth is going to keep the house, I thought she 'd better take the head of the table."

"I suppose," said Bertha, "it 's as well to begin as we mean to keep on."

Ruth sat down in silence. She could not speak, and could scarcely eat. No one noticed her. Bertha looked at her once or twice, but said nothing. Mr. Wentworth was apt to be taciturn at breakfast, a meal which Roland, if present, was wont to enliven. He did so now by a variety of conjugal endearments to his wife, on whose slightest movement he hung enamored. He could hardly let her pour out a single cup of coffee without his help, and when that was over, Ruth saw him fondly holding her hand under the table-cloth. "She ought to be ashamed of herself!"

Mr. Wentworth took himself off at the usual hour. The coffee, which Hannah had made very carelessly of late, had been superb under the new regime, and if there were to be any difficulties in consequence, they had best be settled out of his presence.

"Won't you go with your father?" asked Bertha of Roland. "There might be something you could see to at the office."

"What! leave you this morning, my angel? How can you be hard-hearted enough to suggest such a thing? I shall stay at home and

help you get to rights. I know no end about it."

"I 'm not going to be at home—not yet. I 'm going right round the first thing to see mother; I don't suppose you want to go with me?"

"Not there, my child, not there! I should only be a drawback on your confidences; but you may take my love, and leave my card. I 'll stay with Ruth."

"I am going to Aunt Harriet's," said Ruth, "and then into Uncle James's. I always go there every morning, you know."

"That 's all right. You may tell her all about the wedding, and dilate on the charms of the bride."

"I think you ought to tell her that you are married yourself. I would much rather not."

"Very well. If you have n't told her before you come back, I 'll call and break the news. As if you would n't let it all out the first minute! I 've no very lively curiosity to be present. I can hear it just as well as if I were there—tantine with her 'I am very sorry!' and Charley with' his 'Haw—haw—haw!' Never mind, Bertie, my darling; it 's only tantine's way. She 's sorry for everything, poor dear woman! She 'll dote on you when she knows you."

Ruth, who could almost have laughed at Roland's vivid imitation of his relatives, could

have cried when Bertha laughed at it. She checked herself with an effort, and hurried from the room without waiting to see the appropriate action which accompanied his last words. But before she had fairly settled her hat on her head, a tap came at her door. "Come in—oh, I beg your pardon, I thought it was Kitty," as Bertha appeared, entirely dressed down to her gloves.

"I just want to say, Miss Wentworth, that I don't want to put you out any more than I can help; I really don't," with a pleading glance at Ruth's unmoved face. "I must go to mother's sometimes, and I think she 'll have to come here once in a while. A mother ought to come to see her own child, you know." Ruth, who could not deny the proposition, though unable to see the necessity for Bertha's having a mother, was silent.

"I know my mother is n't the kind you 'd like to meet," went on Bertha, "and I wanted to say—I wanted to say—I know your father goes to Boston every Thursday, to his club. If you won't mind going to your aunt's that day for a while, I 'd ask mother to dinner—I mean luncheon, and one or two of the boys with her sometimes. I 'd never ask more than that; I can make any two of them behave, but if there was more, they might do some damage. You would n't mind going to your aunt's, would you? She 's always glad to have you, I know."

"What difference does it make what I mind? You appear to have entirely arranged your plans."

"Well, if you 've any better ones, I 'd be very glad to hear 'em. I ain't so set on having my own way. I 'd rather have worked till I dropped than come here, if I could have helped it. It was Roland brought me. I did n't know what he was up to till we got here. But look here, Ruth—I may as well call you so, first as last—this thing 's done, and can't be undone. We 've got to live together, whether we want to or not. The only way 's to make the best of it. I 'm just as sorry for you as I can be, and I won't make it any worse for you than I can help. You tell me what you want, and I 'll try and have things to suit you as far as I can; and then, you won't have to stand it long, anyhow."

"Thank you," said Ruth, "I would rather make no plans till I have had the opinion of my friends. Please excuse me now. I am in a little hurry to dress, as my aunt always expects me at ten o'clock"; and she looked at the door. Bertha took the hint, and they parted, both unsatisfied. Why, thought Bertha, was it so easy to plan out what she wanted to say to Miss Wentworth, beforehand, sure that it must carry conviction, and why did the things sound so very different when she said

them? Ruth, meanwhile, allowed that her new sister-in-law might mean well; but it is so disagreeable to be meant well to by a person you don't want to like.

It was easier for Bertha to explain her wishes to Roland, whom she found waiting for her at the foot of the stairs. He only laughed, made a face, and laughed again, with, "Of course, child! It is only a question of time how soon you will rule us all with a rod of iron. Have your mamma when you please, as long as you don't expect me to stay in for her. There are plenty of things I can do—take Sarah Lewis to the Bethel Museum, if I am piously moved, or run up to town and have a spree with Mrs. Tom, if I 'm inclined the other way. There, you need n't mind. I only wanted to see if I could not make you jealous for once."

"Jealous? no, thank you!"

"It 's just as well; for if you were, I pity the woman."

Bertha gave a little contemptuous toss of the head, avoiding the kiss which Roland tried to give her. He insisted, and she refused, and the scene was prolonged sufficiently to catch Ruth's eye, as she came to the head of the stairs, and keep her from descending till Bertha had departed after a lingering farewell at the door, where Roland waited for his sister with one almost as affectionate.

"Good-bye, Ruthie. You look charming. That 's right; make out as good a story for tantine as you can. Of course, I don't expect her to call here on Bertha; that does n't matter as long as we can go there. Tell her I can't live without her, or words to that effect, and assure her that Bertie 's all right. Her family, of course, I shall bounce."

"I had better not say too much," said Ruth; "let auntie wait till she sees your wife and form her own judgment."

"Oh, she 'll like her well enough when she does see her, I'll warrant; all I want is that she should meet her as soon as possible. All you need say is that I assure her on my honor there 's no reason why she should n't, or you either;" and, as he looked at his sister's unsuspecting face, tantine, he thought, is as perfect a little ignoramus in some ways as Ruth herself; but she 'll know what that means; and then, coaxingly: "And you 'd best be good friends with Bertie, Ruth; you 'll find it pays. If you can get along for a while here, it won't come so hard when you have your own house." This last sentence chimed with Bertha's remark of half an hour ago far from pleasantly on Ruth's ears. What were they hinting at? It made her still less desirous to go to her aunt's; but go she must, and in ten minutes she was in Mrs. Binney's own morning room, where the

lady, as usual at that hour, was seated at her desk opening and answering the morning's notes, while Charley smoked his after breakfast cigar on the veranda outside. Mrs. Binney sighed over the habit, caught, she fancied, from Roland; but it saved her many hours of fidget from her son.

"Good-morning, Ruth, dear!" cried the aunt; "how glad I am to see you! But what 's the matter?"

Ruth struggled for speech, and might have succeeded, but for Charley's coming in at the screen door with his old familiar fumble of the latch and stumble at the step. She tried to begin again, but could only throw herself upon the sofa, and burst into a hearty fit of crying.

"My dear—dearest Ruth!" cried her aunt, tenderly alarmed, and hastening to her; "what can have happened?"

Roland, I 'll be bound! thought Charley Binney to himself; for his thoughts were sometimes quick enough, though he was never able to put them into words ahead of other people.

"Oh—" sobbed Ruth, "Roland—Roland 's married!"

"Married? Is it possible? To whom?"

"Oh, to a dreadful, a perfectly dreadful girl!"

"Bertha Chapman, by Jove!" roared Charley, in time for once.

"Are you sure?" anxiously asked Mrs. Binney.

"Yes—he brought her home last night—father says they can stay."

"Oh, dear, how sorry I am!"

"Haw—haw—haw—" exploded Charley.

Ruth remembered Roland's prediction, and her sobs gave way to hysterical laughter, and that again to sobs yet more choking.

"My poor, poor child!" cried Mrs. Binney, with a reproachful look at her son; and then the cut-glass flask of smelling-salts was brought forward, and Charley was hastily told to fetch a glass of water, which he did, spilling half on the way.

"Well, I declare!" he exclaimed, trying to stifle another laugh.

"Charley," said his mother, "if you can't behave with more propriety when we are in such distress, you had better leave the room."

"Why, mother, I can't help it; it seems too funny."

"Did you know anything about it before?" asked Mrs. Binney severely.

"Oh, yes—all the fellows knew Bertha would catch him if she could. He always vowed he was not so green as that; but she was too sharp for him. I always thought he'd find her so."

"Do you know her?" pursued Mrs. Binney, deep disgust in every line of her face.

"Oh, yes," replied Charley, amazed at his own fluency; "I 've known Bertha Chapman ever since we were boys. She went to Lamarque's dancing-class with us. Why, you must have seen her. She tends at Manningham's. She 's awfully pretty."

"That girl!" said his mother; and then, turning to Ruth, who leaned back exhausted and speechless; "my darling, my own child, don't mind it, don't mind it. You shall never stay an hour under the same roof with such a person. You shall live with me, with us; it will only make you our own a little more entirely than before, won't it, Charley?" She kissed the girl again and again, and Ruth responded gratefully, though without any mitigation of her sorrow, for something in the proposal struck with a chill upon her.

"Oh, of course, if Ruth likes it, it will be very nice," assented Charley cheerfully; "but look here, mother, you must n't be too hard on Roland."

"Poor, poor boy!" sighed Mrs. Binney; "no, I shall always love him. I am afraid he has made his own future life one of misery. But it is my duty to protect Ruth from the consequences of his conduct."

"Well, I don't know," said Charley, "as you need think it so very dreadful, and all that. Bertha Chapman is n't a bad girl, you know.

I never heard a word against her character, and I don't believe any one else ever did. She has a queer family, I believe," he added, "though I never saw them. She never let any of the fellows call on her but Roland. If she liked him and wanted to marry him, I don't know that there 's any crime in that; besides, I don't believe she could have stopped his coming if she 'd tried; and if he would keep dangling round her for years, as I know he has, and getting her to like him, and knew she was a good girl, why, he ought to marry her, and I say so. It may be the best thing he ever did, if we don't all set to work to spoil it for him. For my part, I 'm going to be as nice to them both as I know how."

Thus ended the longest speech ever heard by any audience from the lips of Mr. Charles Binney; nor did it fail of effect. His mother had been somewhat displeased that he had not seized the happy moment to press his suit. She had always suspected that he was more in love with Roland than with Ruth; and though that is not the sort of preference that rouses a girl's jealousy, yet this was hardly the time to show it. But as he went on, she was moved by his earnestness, and felt a rare glow of maternal pride at hearing her boy for once speak up like a man. Even Ruth, though perceiving his great inferiority as an orator to William

Noyes, was pleased with the spirit he showed, and felt anew that she could be very fond of him—as a cousin; and she said, with resignation in her voice, "Roland wants you to let him bring her here. He told me to say that there was no reason why she should n't come, or something like that."

"Well—" said Mrs. Binney, slowly, "I suppose he—they may come. Only—you say your father has consented to their living with him?"

"Yes—and—he even wants her to keep the house, sit at the head of the table, and everything."

"Dear me!" cried Mrs. Binney, "that really is too bad! It ought not to be allowed! I really think, Ruth, under the circumstances you would be fully justified in coming to live with us. You might still be on friendly terms with Roland and his wife. Indeed, I think you will find it much more easy to keep to such if you are not in the same house. I will tell Roland so, and settle it with your father."

"Oh, no, dearest auntie, I could n't do that!" cried Ruth, aghast. "I don't think it would be right to leave home entirely; it would make people say things worse than they ought—" she paused, at a loss for words, but sure that no power would ever make her accept her aunt's offer.

Mrs. Binney glanced with gentle reproof at her son, who went so far as to think that if Ruth would give a fellow the slightest encouragement, he might perhaps say something; but no trace of it was given, and nothing was said. After a rather awkward pause, Mrs. Binney said that she would go to see Uncle James, and tell him all about it. "It would be too much for you, my dear; stay here, and Charley shall take care of you till I come back."

"Oh, no, indeed! I told them at home I was going to Uncle James's. I cannot give it up for being—so unhappy," as her eyes overflowed again.

"Dear child! But you need not stay there. Charley shall come for you in half an hour, and bring you back to spend the day. I will write a line to Roland, and ask him to bring his wife here to tea. I don't think I need ask them to dinner till I have met her once."

"Thank you, dear, but I think I had better go home and speak to Roland myself. It will be kinder, poor dear fellow; he is so anxious to hear from you."

"Then Charley shall go home with you."

"Oh, yes! I 'll go round and call on Mrs. Roland!" said Charley, delighted.

"She has gone to her mother's, I believe, but I suppose she will not stay there long. You had better go and stay with Roland till she comes."

"He can go afterwards just as well," said Mrs. Binney; and the end of it was that Charley escorted the ladies over the few rods of sidewalk between the Binney house and Mr. Halstead's. By this time a frantic wish to get away from him made any miseries which might await her at home comparatively bearable to Ruth's imagination; and she spent most of her time at Uncle James's in wondering how she could best accomplish her desire.

XIX

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

BERTHA, meanwhile had gone on her speedy way to her mother's house. The front door there was always locked at this hour, when she was wont to be at the shop, and the boys at school, so she turned down an alley way which skirted the back of the block, so-called, of which it formed a part. The back yards had some faint indication of fences here and there, but so little that no gates were necessary, and she crossed the trodden black strip of earth on which the out-door labors of the Van Winkle household were performed, and entered an open door to find the head of the family in the kitchen. Mrs. Van Winkle's back was turned toward her and remained so even after her greeting of "Well, mother!"

"Well, Bertie—so you 're married, be you?"

"Yes—I 'm married."

"A great thing, I suppose you think 't is." As Mrs. Van Winkle said these words, her head, already, to use her own style of language,

"well up," gave a still farther backward turn.

"I don't know."

"It 's no such mighty thing, being married. Every one is, in one state or another; though 't ain't every one 's married 's often 's I've been in this incarnation."

"Perhaps you felt different when you were a girl."

"I did feel a bit excited first time. But 't warn't anything out o' the common getting married when I was a girl in Aspasia. All the girls did, though none of 'em, as I know married at fourteen but me. I was only fourteen when I married your father, and here are you, well on for twenty-three."

"Yes—I know—" said Bertha thoughtfully. She cast a sideway glance at the little cracked looking-glass before which Mrs. Van Winkle was in the habit of performing such mysteries of the toilet as she had time for, and wondered how much of her own good looks she should retain when she was forty, and what Roland would think of her if she in any way approximated to her mother's present appearance. Poor mother, she thought; she 's had a hard time knocking round, I know. But still she might have taken more pains with herself. There 's no use in leaving *everything* to the spirits.

"Yes, things was very different then," pursued Mrs. Van Winkle. "Every one was friends together. There were no purse-proud aristocrats to put on airs, and look down on them that 's just as good as they are; superior, most likely, if the eternal verities were laid open." This assumption of her professional manner of talk was a sign that her wrath was mitigating, and her daughter answered carelessly:

"I would n't ever think other folks looked down upon me till they told me so pretty plain."

"Well, you 'll find out how it is now fast enough yourself. If you get among 'em, you 'll learn their ways fast enough. I s'pose you kept your wedding so close to please 'em—never even dropping a hint to your own mother!" There was a genuine tremor now in the speaker's voice.

"Now, mother, don't be put out! I 'd have been glad to have told you beforehand, and had you and the folks there if I could possibly have managed it. There was n't any of Roland's folks there either. His affairs have been a little out of order; you know that; and we did n't want to have any talk about them."

"I saw something was wrong when he was here," said Mrs. Van Winkle. "It was strongly borne in upon me by my spiritual agencies that he had got into some scrape or other."

"Well, he 's out of it now, and things look better; and we thought we might as well get married now as any time; so we agreed we'd just step round to the minister's and save a lot of trouble and expense."

"T would n't have been any great trouble, 's far as I can see, to have asked me to put on my bonnet and come along too—if you must go to the minister's."

"Why, I did n't suppose you would hear of any clergyman coming here!"

"You might 'a got married enough for the law at the City Hall—'s long as the barbarous and tyrannical custom of a legal celebration is enforced; and if you wanted any religious exercises, you could have had 'em here, a great deal more quiet and private than trapesing up to Dr. Bowers's and back, and cheaper, too—just ourselves and a spirit friend or two. I 'd like to have Roland hear a little of the harmonies of true marriage. I don't believe he 's heard much from you."

"I 'm afraid not," said Bertha, laughing.

"And where is he now? I s'pose he won't come here no longer now he 's got you?"

"I 'll bring him, of course, some day. I did n't care to this morning."

"Well—I did n't grudge your taking him in before, and I won't now. You 're both of you welcome to come, and stay 's long 's you want to."

"Thank you, dear mother," said the daughter, and now she kissed her mother's cheek; "you are very kind. But Roland does n't want me to work any longer at Manningham's, and we could n't come down on you. We 're going to live at Mr. Wentworth's."

"Possible! you ain't seen 'em yet?"

"We spent last night there."

"Well, I never! I thought you said they did n't know a thing about it."

"They did n't—not till we got there. 'T was Roland's notion, going there. I never dreamed of such a thing."

Mrs. Van Winkle emitted another "possible!" stared at her daughter, ventured a question or two, and stared again with a sort of dawning awe, oddly mingling with an effort at familiarity. "Seen Mrs. Binney?" she whispered.

"No—but Roland says she 'll be all right," and Bertha indulged her mother and herself with a few particulars of her marriage and home-coming. "And, now, look here!" she wound up, "I 'm not going to have the spirits get any credit for my marrying. They did n't contrive it beforehand, and they sha'n't say they did afterwards."

"It is a marvellous thing!" said Mrs. Van Winkle. "Well—I 'll say plainly my indications were all against it; I don't deny it; but earthly prosperity is not the highest object, and it is

not always sought for by our spiritual guides. They planned *my* last marriage."

"Well, if I come to any misfortune, they may take it out then in saying they always said so."

"You were always one to follow your own leadings, and they may be right in this case. I always said you had the gift of insight, if only you would n't scoff at it as you do. Perhaps this may be the appointed means of introducing a purer perception of spiritual truths among that blind aristocratic set."

"Not if I know it," said the daughter, firmly. "Now, look here—I want things fixed, once for all, as they 're going to go on. I told Miss Wentworth so this morning. I said I 'd have you come to dinner—lunch, they call it—every other week on Thursday, and bring some of the boys now and then. The old gentleman goes to Boston that day, and she can go to her aunt's. As for Roland, he can do as he likes, but I won't have her plagued."

"I fail to understand why my presence should be repugnant to Ruth Wentworth. To be sure, that of a woman-soul nurtured on the highest psychical level is apt to prove a devastating force to one who has been lulled by the idiotic shams of society, so-called; but it might do her good to have her eyes anointed with the truths which are to me so self-evident."

"That 's all very well—but I did n't marry Roland to do her any good, and she knows it. It ain't pleasant for either of us, but it 's worse for her. But when she 's married, and in a house of her own, we 'll get on better. I guess you can come next week, but I 'll let you know. And now it 's getting late, and I must run up-stairs and pack up my things."

Mr. James Halstead took the intelligence, carefully broken to him by his niece, of his grand-nephew's marriage, very coolly, saying shortly that he had always expected that Roland would end by doing some such thing. He asked Ruth a few questions, expressed a wish to see Charley alone a moment or two, and then the ladies were recalled to hear that on the whole the matter might be a great deal worse, and that Roland ought to be encouraged. He might bring his bride to be looked at. "And Harriet, you choose a good handsome present from me as soon as you can. We must lend them a hand." Ruth listened in silent wonder, beginning to fear that Uncle James's mind had been affected by his last stroke: an idea which she had until then indignantly repelled as derogatory to a Halstead. She now could almost understand how such a thing could be. Her aunt's remarks, kindly put forward to spare her, irritated her by their tone

of forced cheerfulness, and Charley's racket distracted her. Charley loved his uncle, and meant to please him, but a very little of his presence was as much as the old man could bear, involving as it did a ceaseless fidgeting about the room, opening of drawers and cupboards, knocking over medicine bottles, jerking of window shades up and down, kicking up of the edges of rugs, and the like performances, arising from the poor fellow's absolute inability to sit still. Ruth knew it would end as usual in his being dismissed by his mother, and that she should be dismissed in his company, unless she could devise some plan of escape first.

In the midst of her worry an idea presented itself as original in its simplicity as the theory of gravitation—that if you want to go anywhere, the only way is to go; and she put it into execution with a boldness worthy of it. Her hat was on, and she had the use of her limbs; she rose, left the room, walked downstairs and out of the house before any one could say a word to detain her. Charley, of course, followed her, but by the time he found out that she had really gone, she was far beyond his reach, and she took good care to avoid the direct way home.

Meanwhile, Mr. William Noyes was proceeding by the nearest way from his office to his

early dinner, a little earlier than the earliest lunch hour at Wentworth House. He was not uninformed as to the events of yesterday, for in his pocket lay the following note:

"DEAR BILL:

"Many thanks. Mrs. Wentworth and I came home to-night 'for good,' whatever that may mean. Come and pay the wedding call. You need n't *cave canem*, for I 'll lock him up. For obvious reasons, I have n't told him of our little transaction; at least, I have mentioned no names. I suppose it would be of no use to enclose my I. O. U., but you need not worry, for I am going to have no peace till I have settled with you. Mrs. Wentworth will look out for that. Excuse haste, and believe me,

"Yours ever,
"ROLAND WENTWORTH."

He was revolving these words in his mind with some disapprobation, when, looking up, he saw Ruth's graceful figure a little before him. A stride or two soon brought him up to her, and then he moderated his steps to her lingering walk. He waited a few moments for her to speak, and his silence was grateful to her overwrought nerves. It would have been well if he could have waited longer, but he was too eager for that, and he began, "I hope you are well at home?"

"Yes, thank you."

"And Roland has come back?"

"Yes, he came yesterday afternoon."

"I am very glad to hear it."

Ruth said nothing, but walked silently on. Something in her air and manner shed a chill upon him. He thought again of Roland's note, and indignation, almost with her, arose within him. She need not fear that he was going to reproach her with the shortcomings of her family. True, he reflected, she could not know what was in the note, yet surely he deserved more of her confidence. He summoned up his patience, and said with more constraint than was usual with him, "Roland wrote me of an event in your family—that is, I mean, I suppose by his note that he and Miss Chapman are married. I did not know of it when I met her at Mrs. Binney's."

"They were only married yesterday."

"And they have come home to live?"

"Yes."

"I am afraid you do not much like that?" and as her lip quivered, "but I really do think it may be a very good thing for Roland. She is a good girl, and I believe she loves him truly, and that he cares for her more than he ever cared for any other girl," said William, choosing his language carefully, and trying to study the effect on her as he went along, but

feeling his penetration, somehow, at fault. "We must think of what is best for him," he continued consolingly, "even if it is a little hard for you. You surely," here something in his voice made her look up, "you surely need not mind it so much when it is going to last, I hope, such a very little while." He tried not to speak in too confident a tone, but there was no disguising the joy and triumph in his look. Ruth had never caught such a one before, and she trembled, *non sine vanu aurarum et siluae metu.* She quickened her pace, for they had now nearly reached Wentworth House, and she only paused at the foot of the steps with, "Thank you very much for all your kindness to him. I am sure we ought to feel most grateful."

"Ruth!" cried her lover, desperately, as she turned away, "you are not going to run away from me like this? I am tired of this wretched way of meeting under pretexts. I want to see you openly in your own house. I will make what advances I conscientiously can to your father. There is no reason why I should have any differences with him now;" thinking with some bitterness that Wentworth's power to injure him was gone. "Let me come openly to his house to see you; let me come now."

"Mrs. Roland Wentworth is at the head of the family now," said Ruth, "it is for her to

decide these points. If she would like to have you call, she can do as she wishes about it. Here she is," as Bertha appeared from the other side; and taking advantage of his momentary turn of the head, with a "Please excuse me now;" she slipped up the steps, and through the door, left momentarily open by the maid.

William looked so discomfited that Bertha could not help laughing; but she checked herself directly. "O Mr. Noyes!" she cried, holding out her hand; "this is n't the place to tell you all I feel; but I hope you 'll come soon and see us. I 'll manage it with the old gentleman, soon as I get my bearings here. We have n't told him of all you 've been doing, for that would be a little too much for him to stand; but I see no reason why everything else should n't come all right, pretty quick."

"Miss Wentworth does not seem to like the idea of my coming; I would rather not give her any trouble."

"Now, don't be mad with her. She 's a little put out to-day, and no wonder. It was pretty hard on her, our coming here as we did. She 's the kind to mind such things; and then, too, she thinks you think she's got to have you because you 've done so much for her brother; any girl would mind that."

"She can't imagine that I should ever have such an idea!"

"Oh, yes, she can; it 's silly, of course, but any girl would feel so; why, I should myself! By the time I 've fixed the old gentleman she 'll be all right again. Don't call too soon, that 's all. I 'll give you notice." She stopped in her eager flow of speech, and said hesitatingly, "Heard from Roland?"

"I had a note."

"I dare say it was n't what it ought to have been; but you know Roland; the more he feels, the less he 'll say that is n't stuff and nonsense. He must feel this, if he never did anything else," she went on, looking at William so wistfully that he checked the thought, even to himself, that Roland had no "feelings" on this or any other subject.

"I guess we've stood here long enough," she resumed, more cheerfully. "I won't say that you sha'n't lose anything in the end. I 'd rather you found that out yourself."

"We won't talk of that now. I have not had any opportunity yet to offer you my good wishes."

"Oh, they 'll wait! Keep 'em till you call!"

She ran up the steps and vanished in her turn, having stayed talking to him quite long enough to attract the notice of all passers-by in Northend Street, already stirred with some

vague rumor. William, encouraged by her assurances, grew doubtful again, and had half a mind to storm the castle. But he was wise enough to wait, and went home, pondering now on the propriety of asking his mother's opinion on Ruth's possible or probable mind, but postponing this also, because there seemed so ridiculously little to tell. Mrs. Noyes saw in a moment that something had gone wrong, and guessed in what quarter; but she never asked for his confidence, and only hovered mutely about, concocting some extra delicacy for his supper.

XX

PROPRIETIES

RUTH, meanwhile, had fled to her room like a hunted deer to its lair, and shut and locked the door behind her. Here, at least, she was still at home, even though they were all leagued against her to drive her from its shelter. She loved her father's house. It was a birthplace thoroughly to gratify every local attachment, and to satisfy every desire of æsthetic taste and family pride; and all these tendencies were strong in her, and had been sedulously cultivated. Indeed, she was in some ways happier here, where her father treated her with utter neglect, varied by outbursts of snarling (and these latter, by habit, had grown not unpleasant, belonging to the house, like the whistling of wind in the cupboards, and the shrill chirping of crickets on the hearth), than she was at the Binneys', where her every wish was studied, her every look or word admired. But then, at her aunt's, from her childhood up, there had always been something to be done

or learned. She was never alone there, but always with somebody to be deferred to, or talked to, or listened to. At Wentworth House only, she tasted the joys of solitude the bliss of running wild. There she could sit up in her room after midnight to finish *Red-gauntlet*, or run out bareheaded of a frosty evening to look for Arcturus, or saunter along the dewy garden paths at twilight, chanting long passages of Scott and Campbell. She could scribble away at her desk at rhapsodies on her pet romances, or scraps of original rhyme, without any one by to think, if not to say, that all this was "silliness"—a quality always held in reprobation by Mrs. Binney, who, wise herself, was not wise enough to know that a certain amount of folly is proper to normal healthy girlhood.

If Ruth had begun to allow that it might be possible for her to leave this cherished home some day with the fleeting tears of a happy bride, she was most unwilling to have her whole family assume that she was to be prematurely hurried out of it to suit their convenience or pleasure. Every one was selfish—no one took the smallest pains to consult her wishes as to her own destiny; and here was William, quite as bad as all the rest! As if she had ever hinted a "Whistle, and I 'll come to you, my lad!" She did not want ever to

see him again; she did not want to marry anybody; she wanted to be let alone; a climax of wrath as huge as her gentle nature could attain. She was forced to stifle it on hearing her clock strike half-past one, for though lunch was always served at the pleasure of the family, she did not wish to run any risk of being summoned to it, and after a few moments spent with good effect at her mirror, she descended, to find Bertha sitting at the lunch-table as if she had always been there, with Roland on one side of her and Charley on the other. Roland sprang up to hand his sister to her chair, and Charley imitated him before he had quite got through.

"You are the darlingest of all possible pets," said the brother, pinching her little ear, a caress much affected by him, "and you 've said just the right thing, I know. Charley says his mother 's all right. We 're going round this afternoon to tea, and everything will follow in due course. She 'll be swearing by Bertie before she 's through, won't she, Charley?"

"I should rather think so," Charley eagerly responded, with eyes full of admiration for "Mrs. Roland."

She 's just the girl to please Charley, thought Ruth, scornfully. She expected nothing less than to have them giggling together, and to have Bertha repulsing his advances in the

style of Sarah Lewis, only more so. But her expectations were not realized, and she allowed that her sister-in-law's behavior, only allowing for the monstrous impropriety of her occupying that position at all, was not lacking in propriety. Bertha said very little, but what she did say was perfectly easy, and she treated Charley as if he had always been her cousin, calling him by his Christian name very naturally, and acting as if they were all thoroughly at home. Roland did most of the talking, and made the meal a lively one. No two women could quarrel, even tacitly, in his presence; he could have kept a harem quiet. Ruth thawed, and Charley reaped the benefit. She consented to go with them all to Mrs. Binney's early, for Bertha was to be taken to be inspected by Uncle James before they came back to tea, "entirely by ourselves," which Mrs. Binney thought the proper programme. She even sent Miss Halstead away to visit another accommodating relative. She did not know but that the bride might prove too much for Cousin Rebecca's nerves; her own were, as she felt with some pride, under control. Her precautions were unnecessary, and the visit passed off well enough. The difference of age and position made it easier for her than for Ruth to assume natural relations with Bertha, and she was unwearied in her efforts to please, to which

Bertha responded not ungracefully. Mrs. Binney had made up her mind to do her duty, no matter how difficult it might be, and, relieved to find it less disagreeable than she had expected, ventured on a word of encouragement to her niece. "She is really very pretty!" she whispered, while Roland and Charley were showing Bertha the pictures.

"Do you think so?" said Ruth.

Mrs. Binney sighed as she acknowledged to herself that she could see beauty in that which did not please her darling's more refined taste. She had brought Ruth up to see with her eyes, till, as is apt to happen in such cases when the balance of age shifts, she now began to see with Ruth's.

They all went in a body to see Mr. Halstead, who had no scruples in declaring his unqualified approbation. Bertha, in the sick-room, was on her own ground. She sat where he could see her, spoke so that he could hear her, handed what he wanted before he asked for it, and he looked at her and listened to her with all the delight of house-ridden old age at something fresh and bright and new. She was welcomed, and her husband congratulated, in the old gentleman's liveliest style, and they were only allowed to leave on condition that they should soon come again. "You will come, my dear, if you will be so good, and sit by an old man

now and then, and give my good nurses here a rest. We must n't wear out my little Ruth," with a smile for his pet, which she returned with tender sweetness, though more and more convinced that poor Uncle James's faculties were deserting him. That he, who had always been such a martinet about language, should sit unmoved by the grammatical solecisms which every now and then dropped from the red lips of the bride, was incomprehensible. At some of them even Roland winced a little, and Ruth, while she pitied him, felt that he deserved some humiliation. But Roland never troubled himself long about anything, and never had looked more radiantly happy or handsome than when he sat in his old place by his aunt's side at tea, teasing and making love as audaciously as only a nephew can. She forgave him everything, and smiled on him as affectionately as ever, if a little absently, for her mind was anxiously revolving the question of how he and his wife were to be properly supported.

A heavy weight of responsibility had always rested on her mind in behalf of her sister's children, for which she had looked forward to their marriage as the only permanent relief. Roland, she knew, was "a little wild" but "his heart was in the right place," meaning, that no matter how much it might be lavished by the way, it was sure to drift finally into the keeping

of some nice girl with money. There were so many such, and all so ready and willing to take him! Now, the vista of her cares was suddenly and endlessly extended; but she was not one to shrink from her duties, and heroically began upon them at once.

"I am afraid, Roland," she said, as the party was breaking up, "that Mrs.—I mean——"

"Bertha is my wife's name, dearest tantine. I call her Bertie when she 's very good, and so may you, if you like to."

"I am afraid—you were married rather suddenly, were you not?—that Bertha had—perhaps—not much time for preparations?"

"I know I had n't. No, I don't suppose she had. No woman would be married in an old black gown if she had time to put on anything else."

Mrs. Binney looked mildly scandalized. "I hope that you—that she—will let me do all I can to help her now. If she will go up to town with me to-morrow, if not inconvenient to her, and let me order one or two little things for her?——"

"Of course she 'll be only too happy. You 're an angel; but that 's nothing new."

When Mrs. Binney had put her hand to the plough she was not in the habit of taking it back. She took her new niece to Boston the next day, and ordered her a handsome outfit, rewarding herself meanwhile by purchasing a

present here and there for Ruth. The expedition was not an unpleasant one to either party. Bertha showed judgment, and a decided taste, and took some enjoyment in exercising them, according to her usual practice of picking up any that was to be found. There were drawbacks in the way that every head-saleswoman or modiste of them all started and stared at the sound of "Mrs. Roland Wentworth," and in the waste of money involved. If Mrs. Binney had but given her in cash half the sum they were spending, she could have got all that was necessary, and have had some left to put by toward the debt, which even thus early began to weigh heavily upon her. But she could make no suggestions. Mrs. Binney next proceeded to her silversmith's. "I shall, of course, give you your spoons and forks," she said thoughtfully. She knew that Wentworth house was overflowing with silver of every date, but none the less was it proper that Mrs. Roland Wentworth should bring in some of her own. Had she been Rosie Robbins or some other heiress, it would have been a harder task to choose something unique in gold or precious stones; but there was not much work here. Bertha was asked which of two or three patterns she liked the best, and then dozens of forks and spoons of all sizes were ordered as carelessly as if they were so many hairpins.

But little more time went to selecting a silver tea-set which Mr. Halstead was to give, and then Mrs. Binney herself picked out a silver tray which she said Ruth had asked her to choose on her behalf, and which, though this she did not say, was charged on her own bill.

"And Charley," said the great lady, for the first time pausing in this perfunctory pursuit, which she was putting through, as workmen say, "by the job"—"Charley would like to give you something to wear, I think,—a pin, or a bracelet. I shall let him choose it himself, only if you would like to look at a few—and see if you fancied any—?" She looked at her companion, as if considering the becoming. She had always set aside some of her own jewels for Roland's wife, and she was not sure that she cared to bestow them in this case. But Bertha, for the first time in Mrs. Binney's knowledge of her, colored all over, her brilliant bloom lost in the deep red flush that mounted to her very brow. "No—please don't," she murmured, almost inaudibly.

"Well, dear, we won't trouble ourselves about that now. You must be very tired, and it is getting late. Let us go and have some lunch." She felt as if she ought to make an apology, but could only do so by look and tone. Something like a flash of understanding had passed between the two.

XXI

AN EARTHQUAKE SHOCK

THE morning after the shopping expedition, Bertha considered it to be Roland's duty to accompany her in a call upon her mother. With some difficulty he was half coaxed, half reasoned into going "just this once." She judiciously refrained from specifying whether the number mentioned meant once in a season, or once in a lifetime. Mr. Wentworth was at his office as usual of a morning. The house was clear and quiet and ready for any calamity. No better opportunity could be offered for Hannah, the cook, to wash her hands, tie on a clean apron, and take the unwonted step of knocking at Miss Wentworth's own door in the middle of the morning. Admitted, she began with solemnity:

"Miss Ruth, I want to know, if you please, if I 'm expected to have things given out to me a pennyworth at a time? Because it 's not what I 've been accustomed to."

Ruth had expected some such speech as this,

though not perhaps quite so soon, and she felt a certain satisfaction, of which not a particle appeared in her very quiet tone, as she made, with eyes fixed the while on the note she was writing, her premeditated reply. "I have nothing to do with the housekeeping, now, Hannah. You must speak to Mrs. Roland Wentworth."

"I 've not been used to do with that sort of person, miss. I don't think I 'll be able to stay if things is going on this way."

"I am sorry; but indeed I think you had better speak to Mrs. Wentworth yourself. Of course, you would n't think of leaving us."

"If you would only say a word for me, Miss Ruth, and tell her your mamma never treated me that way, nor you, neither. I lived with your mamma before you were born; you know that; and I nursed her on her death-bed; and you know if I ever touched a thing that was n't given me. I can't stay for it to be hinted that I do."

"I will say that, certainly," said Ruth. Hannah's threat of leaving struck her like a threat of the skies falling; something which would doubtless be very dreadful if it did occur, but which in the nature of things was impossible. She could not remember the time when Hannah had not lived there. After her mistress's death, the whole direction of the house-

keeping had very naturally slidden into the cook's hands, not to be withdrawn by Miss Wentworth as she grew up, and indeed Ruth never tried; for, as she reflected, she had to be away so much, and Hannah was such a faithful creature and so devoted! Hannah was indeed sincerely fond of the young girl in her own way. As with many elderly single women in all ranks of life, the salvation of her own soul, and the performance of the religious duties calculated to insure this, was her first object; the amassing of a provision for her own support when she should grow too old for even the duties of her exceedingly comfortable place at Wentworth House was her second; the helping up her own relations in the world came third; and if the portion of her affections left for her young mistress was a comparatively small one, it was quite as large in proportion as Ruth's for her. "Miss Ruth" and her daily doings and social successes, naturally filled a larger space in the maid's more limited horizon than the maid did in the mistress's; but in return, the maid was much more necessary to the mistress's comfort than the mistress was to the maid's.

Ruth felt another thrill of mild satisfaction, perfectly veiled by decorum, in the communication of Hannah's rebellion to Mrs. Roland Wentworth; but Bertha's composure was

unbroken, and to the culminating terror that Hannah had actually talked of going, she replied coolly, "I think it would be the best thing she could do."

"Oh, but, Bertha!" cried Ruth, struck by amazement into sudden familiarity; "I don't believe you could get along without Hannah. I don't think any one else could ever do the work in this house—such a large house! She knows where everything is kept, better even than I do, a good deal."

"I 've no doubt she does; but if I 'm going to live here and keep house, she sha'n't know it better than I do. I don't suppose you could help it, but you 've let her have her own way in everything, and now she won't stand the least control. I don't mean to say anything to hurt your feelings, but you 're away, off and on, about half the time, and any woman would take advantage of that."

"I always find things in just as good order as I left them, no matter when I come back."

"Very likely; but it costs an awful sum to live that way."

"I am as sure of Hannah's honesty as I am of my own. She has lived here twenty—twenty-three years, and there never has been one single thing missed."

"All I have to say is, the stores go too fast,

and I mean to stop it;" and, answering Ruth's look of silent indignation, "I don't mean to call her dishonest; I dare say she 's honest enough about not taking money or silver or such things. I know just how it goes here. I 've never lived out, but I 've seen something like it tending store. She 's been allowed to order what she pleased, and she 's ordered twice as much as was necessary, and then had to give the things away, or perhaps throw 'em away rather than have 'em spoil. There 's no end to that. Then the kitchen things have been knocked about, and broken, and rusted, and others bought, when the old ones would have done just as well with cleaning and mending. The cellar is choked up with enough of 'em now to load a steamer. I know a little about what Manninghams used to send in for this family! Now, I 'm not blaming you, for I know it 's hard when a girl grows up in a house with a woman like that, but for me, coming in this way, it 's very different."

"If she goes, Julia will too—she 's her niece, you know—and I don't believe Kitty would stay without them."

"Let 'em go. I should be very glad to see 'em all out of the house."

"I should think you would find it very hard to fill their places," said Ruth, tempted on by Bertha's desperate hardihood to argument,

which still she felt to be undignified. "They do almost all the washing, you know. Aunt Harriet wonders we manage with so few. I don't believe you 'll get three other women to do the work they do."

"Why, I could do it myself! Washing? They don't do half the wash! All the shirts put out, and your dresses! I don't deny there 's a heavy wash sometimes, when you are all at home; but they ought to manage when you 're away, so 's to bring things even. They have a woman in half the time to help with that, and the cleaning, and the preserves, and everything! and a man to do the chores—and yet they don't even keep things clean!" And as Ruth looked round the exquisitely neat room: "Oh, yes, they keep clean on top, and let the rest go. Do you know how it looks in the drawers of the back-kitchen closet?"

Poor Ruth had never in her remembrance so much as entered the back-kitchen closet. She was silent a moment before she faltered out: "Hannah lived here—when I was born—and she nursed my mother—she was very nice at that, and mamma liked her better than the regular nurse; and she cooked everything mamma ate—no one else could do it—to please her—Aunt Harriet has often told me about it. It seems so ungrateful—to turn her off like this!" By this time Ruth was fairly crying,

though deeply mortified with herself for giving way in Bertha's presence.

"Yes, I know that," said Bertha. "I 'm very sorry about it. I don't think, though, there 's any real ingratitude about the matter. She 's had an easy place here, and plenty of chances to lay up money. Her wages are high, and though they have n't been very regularly paid, she 's always got money from your father when she wanted it. I think there 's very little owing her; and she 's had lots of presents, I know. She 's getting too old to do the work she ought to here, but if she 'd take a room with some of her friends, she could go out accommodating a good while yet. We 'll give her something when she leaves, and do the thing properly. It would save us money in the end. 'T will be better to do it now, and be done with it, than wait till she gets any older."

Between each sentence Bertha had waited for Ruth to put in a word, but no words came. Ruth was overpowered by the intimate knowledge Bertha possessed of all the Wentworth affairs. It was impossible that she could have acquired it all in the few days of her married life; she must have extracted it from Roland in courtship days, and that idea was most repulsive. How shockingly underbred to question a man about such family matters, even if you were engaged to him! and how could a girl of any

refinement talk about such matters with a man at all?

"I 'm sorry, if you 're fond of her," went on Bertha, good-humoredly. She would have followed up her advantage with a kiss, but this Ruth could not allow. She had never touched Bertha yet, and she slipped away from her and out of the room at once.

These interviews, little as she showed it, were quite as unpleasant for Bertha as for Ruth; but while the memory of them rankled in Ruth's mind, and awoke equally painful visions of the future, they were wiped off Bertha's as quickly and completely as a huckster wipes his daily account off a slate. There was so much debit and credit in the day's account, and if the balance leaned ever so little the right way, it was enough; if it did not, she must work a little harder to-morrow, that was all. She wasted no time in brooding over things.

Later in the day the deposed ruler of the house came into the drawing-room, where both ladies were sitting waiting for Roland, who was dressing, and red and stiff with repressed anger, declared her intention of not staying to be treated like a thief. Ruth grew pale with alarm, but Bertha, looking hardly conscious of the intrusion, answered coolly:

"I don't mean to say anything against you, or any one, Hannah; I only said that a ten-

pound roast of beef ought to last us for more than one dinner."

"There was hardly enough for the girls to get theirs, after the trimmings was off, and the bones——"

"Then I shall choose the next piece without so many trimmings; I am going to market myself in future, and pick out my own meat."

"Then you may do your own work!" broke out the exasperated Hannah; "it 's what you 're fit for, more than sitting up like a lady in the parlor here."

"Now, Hannah, I wish to be your friend, and, if you go, to have you go with everything as it ought to be; but if you think you are going to get anything out of me by impertinence, you are very much mistaken."

"I don't care how soon I go, or what folks say of me. I 've a good character, and enough to live on, I thank my blessed Lord! It 's you that had better be looking out. You need n't think I don't know too much about this house to care for staying in it. If it was n't for Miss Ruth I 'd have shook the dust from my feet before ever it came to this. I guess I know enough of the old man, and his goings on, and as for Roland—there 's plenty I could tell about Roland you might 'nt like to hear, though you know pretty well how 't is yourself by all accounts. If you think your being married

to him at last has made you fit company for Miss Ruth, you 're mistaken; and if it come to that, there 's those, and I could name 'em, had a right to come ahead of you." Hannah's English failed, and a muttered word or two in Erse rumbled like a retreating storm that gathers up its strength to burst again.

Ruth was white and motionless. Hannah's civility to her had never been broken but by a petting familiarity which was quite allowable in an "old family servant." Was it possible, she thought, that all people of that class lived under extinguishers in the presence of their betters? She looked at Bertha, almost asking for sympathy, but Bertha was in no way disturbed, and only said quietly, "You may leave the room."

"I 'll leave the house, then, and be d——d to you."

"Certainly you may. I shall not keep you now on any conditions."

"I 'll leave this moment, if you 'll pay me my wages that 's owing to me these two quarters."

"You may go to-morrow morning. You know we are all going out to-night but Mr. Wentworth, and he will be here at dinner. Send it up at the regular hour, as I ordered."

Hannah looked as if about to answer, but another glance at Bertha made her leave the room without more ado.

This was not the most agreeable preparation, for either of the sisters-in-law, for a dinner at Mrs. Binney's—a very quiet little dinner, given to introduce Mrs. Roland Wentworth to some of her new relations. The Wentworths were asked to come early and found only Mrs. Binney, her son, and Sarah Lewis, who had just arrived on one of her periodical visits. The half-dozen naturally broke into pairs, and Mrs. Binney secured her niece, whose pallor alarmed her.

"Oh, auntie!" broke out Ruth, too much excited for reticence; "we have had a terrible time with the servants. They are all going; that is, Hannah is, and, of course, if she does Julia and Kitty will go too." She lowered her voice, with an uneasy look toward Bertha, though aware that no one sitting by Charley was likely to overhear much. "She says they have been wasteful, and they are very angry with her."

"People of that class never get along with servants, when they have them," said Mrs. Binney. "I am sorry about Hannah. You will miss her."

"I don't know. She has been very impertinent, and said such dreadful things! I don't know what she meant——"

"What? to you?"

"Oh, no, indeed!"

"Of course they all recognize a lady," said

her aunt, caressingly. "I dare say Mrs. Wentworth means very well; she probably thinks that in her position she ought to economize, and is not accustomed to command, and does it awkwardly. You must not trouble yourself, dear. It is better to have Hannah go than be always worrying about her. I will give her a handsome present, and see that she gets a good place, and all that."

"Bertha says she has no doubt that she can get along very well by going out by the day to work. She thinks that will be better for her at her age than to take another permanent place."

"So it will, I dare say. You see, my dear, she has some sense. You cannot expect refinement, with her lack of education. If there is any trouble in finding new servants you can come here and stay while it lasts."

"Thank you, dear auntie; but I think I ought to stay and try to make myself of use; for father's and Roland's sake, if for nothing else."

"You dear unselfish child!"

XXII

SUN AND SHOWER

"I NEVER, never saw so beautiful a creature as Mrs. Wentworth!" gushed Sarah Lewis in Roland's ear; "except dear Ruth, of course; they are so different, yet each so perfect in her way!" She glanced ecstatically from one to the other. "How happy she looks," with a sigh marked with sentiment, "and how happy you must be!"

"Yes," drawled Roland, in tones to match, though more musical; "Bertha is a good girl —but—" he echoed her sigh with double force.

"Bertha? Is that her name? What a lovely one, and how perfectly it suits her! How you must adore her!"

"There is a difference," said Roland, "between adoration and love. There 's the adoration we feel for one far, far above us—love without hope; the desire of the moth for the star, of the night for the morrow; and there 's the common working-day love, that seeks what

it may find here; the love for one within our reach. Well for us if we do not find, too late—" His rich voice faltered, and he looked a volume at Sarah from his magnificent eyes; gray eyes as dark as his wife's, but with a brown hazel streak in them that could flash a ruddy spark: eyes of all eyes for expression.

Sarah did her best, without much success, to look effusive and reproving at once.

Bertha, meanwhile, was receiving the attentions of her host; and so well did she know how to help out his half-formed sentences with the very word he was thinking of, and so easily did she bring up a new subject when he had no more to say, that he replaced the half envious thought that Roland was always lucky, with one that it was going to be a great stroke of luck for himself. He was sorry when his mother approached, with "There are some parcels for you here, my dear. I told Norwood and Batchelder to send them to me. I thought you would like to show them to our friends, and it will amuse Uncle James to see them. If you like, we will take them to him to-morrow, and then I will send them home for you." She did not add another reason, which was, that she hoped the sight of the gifts might remind her other guests to do something in emulation. Bertha could only ac-

quiesce, and every one gathered round to see the boxes opened, and duly admired their contents, which Sarah indiscriminately classed as "lovely"; and then Charley, with a grin, and a few inaudible words, handed Bertha a small case, whose contents made ample amends for any lack of grace in its presentation, for it held a long brooch with five diamonds in a row, each of which represented a very respectable sum.

"Oh, how sweet!" cried Sarah.

"Thank you," said Bertha, "they are beautiful."

"You will look so lovely in them!" cried Miss Lewis, with redoubled ardor.

"And perhaps, my dear," went on the lady of the house, "you will not value this the less for having once belonged to me. I never wear such things now," she added, with the very slightest lowering of her low voice, as she held out a broad necklace of wrought gold, encrusted with little flashing points of ruby and diamond. Bertha's repeated "thank you," though earnest, rang rather seriously. She was thinking that it was the less wonder Roland's family objected to his marriage if it involved them in such incredible expenses. Miss Lewis's admiration had now reached the speechless point. She had looked forward herself to sharing in Mrs. Binney's treasures,

and to see one of the prettiest going to an intruder who had brought nothing into the family was too much for her. Tears rose to her eyes, but no one noticed either her or Bertha's silence, covered as it was by Roland's delight as he clasped the necklace round his wife's throat, drew back to see the effect, and kissed her glowing cheek, and then his aunt's too, with "That 's like you, dearest of creatures. Just fits her neck and matches her roses," regarding with appreciation the great bunch of crimson roses which nestled in the cream lace of Bertha's gown.

"It was always a little too large for me," said Mrs. Binney, as she raised her hand, with a passing thrill of reviving youthful vanity, to her own slender throat, still fair and delicate, but now veiled with thick folds of white crape. Ruth's, she thought, well-satisfied, was of the same mould, and the trinket set much more suitably on the stately white column of a neck that Bertha carried high above them both. "And there are some more parcels for you," she went on; "I don't know what; but Norwood sent down one of their own men with our things, and he said some other presents had been ordered there for you, to be sent to my care;" and she put forward two boxes, still in their neatly folded and tied up wrappers. "I would not take the

trouble to open them now," she added, quick as thought, as she caught a reluctant look in the bride's eyes.

"Oh, by all means!" exclaimed Roland, "let us see what your friends have contributed, Bertie. I did n't know you had any in the present-giving line; but if," he went on as he untied the ribbons and unfolded the papers with his usual dexterous handling, "they are from some of your mamma's spiritual acquaintances, they certainly seem to have materialized by the weight. Hum—very fair—yes, very fair indeed," as he drew from the larger parcel a silver basket of graceful design, and read from the accompanying card, "Mr. and Mrs. Joseph R. Manningham."

"How lovely!" cried Miss Lewis, with reviving spirits.

"Very pretty, I am sure," said Mrs. Binney; "they are most excellent, worthy people;" and Ruth, quite willing to be kind when it involved no concession, seconded her.

"Mr. Manningham has always been real good to me," said Bertha, "but I 'm sure I did n't expect any such present as this from him." She looked askance at the other and much smaller box, wishing she could open it when by herself; but this was impossible; and she herself drew from its innermost softest wrap, the daintiest of watches, with a diamond

monogram at the back, and a diamond clasp at the end of the chain.

"Oh, what a perfect, perfect beauty!" cried Sarah.

"Very handsome, indeed," said Mrs. Binney, with some animation.

"I never saw so pretty a one," said Ruth, courteously.

"Peter Manningham, with best wishes," read Roland taking up the card. "Well, I knew the old boy had good taste. He showed it by being so awfully smashed on Bertie himself. Very generous in him, considering the disappointment."

"Roland!" cried Bertha, and then checked herself as suddenly. She stood for a moment showing how she could look when angry, and then rushed into the next room. Roland laughed heartily, followed of course by Charley, and then, with a sudden transition to seriousness, murmured sadly in Miss Lewis's ear, "You see what I have to put up with." It was as impossible for him to keep from tickling any woman's vanity, as it was for Charley to keep from laughing at everything.

Ruth looked as if every one were very much to blame, and Mrs. Binney hastened after Bertha, whom she found cooling her flushed cheeks at the window. "My dear," said the elder lady, kindly putting her arm round the

girl's waist, "don't mind Roland. He has a way of running on which is not always in good taste; but we don't mind it."

"Oh, Roland! as if I did n't know Roland!" cried Bertha. "I 'm dreadful silly. I ought n't to have married him if I could n't keep my temper with him. I do, most generally; but it was mean in him to say that about Mr. Manningham. I can 't bear to hear him made fun of. There was n't any harm in it, if he did like me, though of course 't was a very foolish thing for him."

What a pity, thought Mrs. Binney, that she could not have made up her mind to take that excellent Mr. Manningham. He would have made her a good, kind husband, and probably his family would n't have minded her lack of refinement. Nevertheless, with every unladylike outburst of emotion on Bertha's part, she felt somehow an increased liking for the girl. She wondered what there was about her so unlike a lady, and looked through the open door at Ruth's distant graceful form, the better to discover what it could be. The sound of an approaching carriage made them both start, and hasten to present themselves in company trim.

The party passed off very well, greatly to the hostess's relief, and the relations seemed agreeably disappointed in the bride, who was,

as Mrs. Binney took pains to inform them all privately, really a very good girl, with much right feeling. Ruth, who had been asked to spend the night, could not refuse, and was left to encounter a burst of admiration for herself and her new sister from Sarah, mingled with keen, dexterous, imperceptible questioning. Roland and Bertha were only too well content to be free to walk home by themselves, through the soft summer night, and to linger in the long lonely stretches past "high-walled gardens, green and old."

"Forgive me, won't you, Bertie, there's a darling!"

"What for?"

"I should think you'd recollect, you made such a fuss about it."

"You did so many horrid things, I can't tell which you mean."

"I do assure you I should n't have said it but for the tender feelings you are always showing for old Manningham. I never saw you look so stunning as you did when you came back after your break-out. It came over the Bosworths completely, but it made me furiously jealous."

"I don't mind about Mr. Manningham. Your nonsense is n't going to do him any harm. But I don't want to see you make such a fool of that Sarah Lewis."

"Nature has been beforehand with me there,

dearest! I only wanted to make you a little jealous for once."

"You may spare your pains then; you 'll never do it in *that* quarter. But it 's a little too mean to her—before me and all of them."

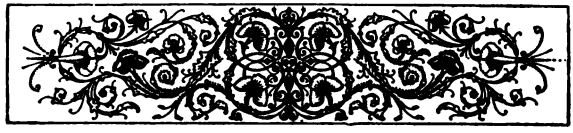
"I did n't mean to go quite so far; but matrimony has wonderfully increased my power to charm, thanks to you, or else Sarah's knowing she can't have me adds piquancy to the situation. I 'll try to draw it milder; but something must be done, for I can't bear to see her walk off with Charley before my very eyes, even if he 's lost his chance with Ruth, which I 'm not quite sure he has."

"I am."

"If she marries Bill Noyes, Charley will fall to Sarah by mere propinquity, as Miss Edgeworth says: and then I am not sure that Sarah is quite such a fool all through as she seems; women seldom are. I tell you, Bertha, if you object to my turning her silly head, you must save me the trouble by looking after Charley. I give you full leave to flirt with him to any extent. If you want to make me jealous, you 'll never do it in *that* quarter!"

Both laughed heartily as they drew closer and closer together in the shade of the porch. "There!" said Roland; "we 've had enough of Sarah, and Charley, and Bill Noyes; I don't know which is the stupidest. Come, Bertie,

come and let 's have a cigar in the garden, and none of them shall be mentioned under penalty of a forfeit; the usual one, so you need n't take too much pains to avoid it. As for old Peter, he shall be spared in consideration of his present. He 'll have his revenge: it will last my life though, and I shall have to keep time by it."



XXIII

MASTERS OF OUR STARS

RUTH was hardly prepared for Hannah's coming to her next morning in floods of tears, saying it would kill her to go ; she 'd try and get along, if Mrs. Wentworth would keep her. But Bertha was inexorable. " After what passed last night," she said to the woman, when the petition was repeated to her, " it is useless to say any more. I should like to have you go before dinner."

Hannah looked furious again, though nothing comprehensible escaped her. She muttered something in her native tongue, that last expiring relic of a vanishing age, and left the room. Ruth could not have believed that her departure would at last present itself in the light of a relief, but so it was. However, when, that very day, both Julia and Kitty curtly declared their intention to leave when their weeks were up, and Bertha unconcernedly acquiesced, her heart sunk within her. " Who will cook the dinner?" she asked in an awestruck tone, as the last maid disappeared.

"Oh, I can cook the dinner!" said Bertha, laughing; "Julia will serve it up, of course."

"But are you not afraid of what Hannah may say—to other people?"

"I doubt if she does; if she wants to, she may. Anything would be better than to have her staying on now. Never give hush money; there 's no end to it."

The exodus of the servants took place and the family survived it. Bertha engaged fresh ones, and reorganized the work with a new routine. She reduced the number of maids to two; and as the personal service all the members of the family except herself required forbade too sweeping a change, she kept on the laundress who came for a couple of days in the week, and the man for the morning and night chores. But the old hangers-on who had filled these places disappeared also in the general sweeping out, and were replaced by younger and more efficient ones, and the household ran as smoothly as ever. Bertha was here, there, and everywhere. The days were too short for her. She cleaned out the whole house from garret to cellar, all but Ruth's own peculiar premises, sparing no pains meanwhile to keep Mr. Wentworth comfortable, and Roland amused. The latter was the harder task, but the delights of marriage had not yet palled on Roland, and she took pains not to let them. He was clever

at every handicraft, and she turned this to account for her assistance, seasoning their labors with fun and frolic, no matter how childish. When she had any uninteresting piece of business on hand, she sent him off boating or driving with Ruth or Charley, or both, accompanying them herself just often enough to make her absence sensibly felt when she did not.

The days that flew so lightly by for Bertha, dragged on leaden feet for Ruth. The young women were not equally matched. Ruth did not irritate Bertha, indeed was a daily delight to her beauty-loving eye, while Bertha jarred on Ruth's nerves every hour, and her beauty, though acknowledged, had no power to charm. Then Bertha was in her place, with her destiny settled, while Ruth was hovering uncertain and uneasy on the brink of hers; the more uncertain because William had ceased to make any sign. He sent Bertha a large bronze vase, supposed to be handsome, but he did not call.

Bertha would freely ask Ruth's advice on fine points of housekeeping, of which she herself was ignorant, frankly avowing that she never had a chance to learn; and Ruth, not to be outdone in virtue, offered to help in any way.

"If there 's anything you 'd like to take the whole charge of, 't would be a very good thing," said Bertha; "the linen closet, now; that would n't keep you in when you wanted

to be going anywhere, and 't would be a good thing for you to learn how to take care of it. When you 're married, you 'll find 'know how very easy to carry about.' "

All this was very true, if it did not chime in very pleasantly with Ruth's present mood. She acknowledged that Bertha had good principles of a kind. In fact, both girls were brimming over with good principles; but good principles that don't agree are often more disagreeable than none. Ruth had made up her mind never to begin a discussion; but she was now and then betrayed into some careless remark.

"Is it worth while to take so much trouble to save such a very small sum?" she asked wearily, tired of hearing Bertha balance the pros and cons in relation to new towels.

"I want to save all the money I can," replied Bertha, "so as to feel that I am laying up a little something toward paying William Noyes. I sha' n't rest till that 's done, and I should n't think you would, either."

"Of course," said Ruth, loftily, "but there need be no hurry about it. It will certainly be done."

"I don't know. I should n't feel it right to take money for it, as long as your father will have everything charged, and let the bills run up. But if I can show him how much I can save, perhaps I can get him to make me a

regular allowance, and then I 'll save it in time, and never show any difference."

"We shall pay it, of course," repeated Ruth, with a superior smile.

"No one but Roland shall pay it," said Bertha, decidedly. "You can't; you 've three thousand coming in from your grandfather's estate, but not till you 're married. I wish to goodness Roland's had been tied up till he married; he had it when he was twenty-one, worse luck! But you ought not to part with that; William and you ought to have it beside."

"I don't know what you mean," said Ruth, in high displeasure.

"Of course, Mr. Binney could hand over the money, and never feel it; but Roland sha' n't take it. It 's been the Binneys, always the Binneys! Hanging on to 'em has been Roland's bane all his life. There was always your aunt to give him everything he wanted when he was little, and Charley to fill his pockets when he grew older; and you were to marry Charley and make it all right; but you know very well that can't ever be now."

So Ruth did, but she was not going to avow that or anything else to Bertha, who knew too much without her telling. She put on her hat and strolled out, as much to end this discourse as anything else. It was a lovely afternoon, and she strolled aimlessly on. Where should

she go? Her aunt doubtless expected her—she did not want to go there. If she walked along the street, she was sure she should be run across by William Noyes, who seemed to know by instinct when she was out alone; and she was sure she never wanted to see him again. Why, there he was now, advancing on the opposite side of the street. How unlucky!

But—but yet, how noble he looked! How much nobler, how much handsomer, than she had remembered or imagined him! Of course no one could approach Roland in looks or air, such was the opinion of all her kin, and clan, and friends, whose opinion was the only one in the world to be considered; still, when she looked at William, how fresh and free a breath seemed to come from him of something that Roland lacked; something that she had never known in man before; and she had been willing to think that she did not care for him! Perhaps he expected that she would be gracious. Well, let him!

She slackened her pace ever so little, and her eyes for a moment flashed a bright encouraging beam. But William did not avail himself of the opportunity offered him. His own face grew grave, and he bowed with an air of deep respect, and what would have been dejection in a presence less robust and healthy, and then went on his way. He had none of Roland's

experience with women, but into character in general he had considerable insight, and he treated Ruth just as he would have treated a man friend with whose behavior he had cause to feel dissatisfied; and his knowledge of human nature in the mass, with no fine discrimination as to class and sex, served him well enough.

Ruth paused not a second in her graceful walk, and no emotion was visible in her face; but for a moment her heart stood still. When it began to beat again, her purpose was fixed. She knew one place in the world where she was not expected; a place, too, from which William Noyes was making his way as fast as possible, and there she determined to go. In about ten minutes Mrs. Noyes heard a light ring at her doorbell, and, as was her custom when her one maid was busy, answered it herself. There stood Miss Wentworth, a charming vision in her blue muslin gown and big Leghorn hat, trimmed by an artist's hand with black velvet and white lace, and one full-blown pink rose almost shedding its petals. Had they met anywhere else, Mrs. Noyes might have felt shy and awkward; but at her own door all embarrassment was lost in the glow of hospitality.

"My dear Miss Wentworth! How very kind of you! Do come in!"

Ruth's fit of desperation, which had carried

her to the door, and held out till she had pulled the bell, had at once deserted her at its sound. Her first impulse had been to rush down the steps and round the corner, like a naughty child, but the sound of steps inside had as quickly arrested that, and she had sought hastily in her little gold-fitted blue morocco bag for a card, and having luckily found one, prepared to hand it to the maid with a civil inquiry after Mrs. Noyes's health, and depart with dignity. Baffled again, she could only take her hostess's offered hand, and say, with a shy smile and faint blush that gave her her loveliest look, while they diminished in no way the grace of manner which was as much a part of her as her skin:

"Thank you; I have been hoping for some time that you would come to see me at my aunt's; but I thought you would not mind if I came here first."

"Oh, no, indeed! We old folks ought to feel grateful if young people will take their time for us."

"I don't know why you should," said Ruth. Her ships were burned, and she could do nothing but follow her hostess into the "front parlor," pretty, but too stiffly kept in order. A wide-open door at the back showed another more cosy room with bookcases, and a big table with scattered books and papers, and other tokens of

man's presence. "It is we who should be grateful," she went on, "we ought to feel it kind in older people to give up their time to us; allowing you to be older, which we might not know if you did not tell us."

Mrs. Noyes smiled. She had never seen any one so pretty as her visitor; and a remembrance of the way in which the Miss Manninghams would sneer at their father's opinions, and ridicule their mother's taste, even while both parents were carefully deferring to them, rose vividly to her mind. They were anxious to win her good will; yet even to her their attentions generally took the form of setting her right, as one hopelessly behind the times. I wish, she thought, that Carry and Laura could hear how Miss Wentworth talks to me! and then aloud, "Young girls are so busy nowadays; they never seem to have time for anything."

"I suppose some of them are; I often feel as if I were myself; and yet, my life is a very quiet one, compared to many. I am a great deal at my aunt's; but that I call being at home; and she goes out so little—she likes quiet."

"I quite agree with her," said Mrs. Noyes, better and better pleased, as she proudly compared her destined daughter-in-law with the deposed candidates for that post of honor. "If girls were in the habit of making themselves useful at home, there would not be so many

complaints about women wanting a sphere, and such nonsense. When I was young, we were taught how to manage a house."

"I wish I had been."

"I dare say you understand a great deal."

"I am afraid not. I fear I am a very useless person. At my father's we always have had servants who had their own way a great deal; and I did n't know—perhaps I did n't try—how to get them into order. My aunt's housekeeping is on a scale I could never expect to imitate. It is only lately I have been wishing I knew more; that I could learn more."

"Oh, I know you could soon learn everything!" cried Mrs. Noyes, more and more enchanted. What matter if Miss Wentworth did not know butter from cheese, so long as she confessed her ignorance with such ingenuous sweetness? "You could soon learn," she went on, "no girl ever really knows how to keep a house till she has the responsibility for one. When I was married, a great deal came new to me; but I soon got along all right."

"You must have had a natural taste for it."

"No; I am afraid the real truth was that my dear husband was sure to be pleased with everything I did;" and as her hearer looked sympathetic, "and so is my son; he is almost

too contented. 'William,' I always say, 'I can't tell whether the things are as good as they ought to be or not;' and then he says, 'Everything at home is always good.'"

"That is very pleasant."

"Why, yes; only, if people are critical, you feel more pleased when you 've satisfied them; not but what William is particular enough in some ways. He wants everything as neat as wax, and as clean as hands can make it; and his own things he always keeps in order; his papers and books, I mean; I never have to take a step after him."

"It is a lovely day, is it not?" put in Miss Wentworth, a little irrelevantly.

"Yes, very. The gardens are looking beautiful now when most folks are away. I very seldom go from home for more than a day or two; but you, Miss Wentworth, are generally away in summer, are you not?"

"We are spending this summer in Bethel on my uncle's account."

"Oh, yes; I 've heard William speak of Mr. Halstead; I hope he is pretty comfortable."

"Much the same, thank you; Mr. Noyes has been very kind in inquiring after him; but he sees no one out of his own family now."

"William has always admired your uncle. Mr. Halstead has been very kind to him: and William is always grateful; he never forgets a

friend;" and as the young lady sat silent, "excuse me, Miss Wentworth, for saying so much; but mothers will be talking, you know."

"Yes, indeed! I cannot remember my mother."

"Poor child! I can't remember mine. But my aunt was one to me, and your aunt has been one to you, I 'm sure."

"She has—almost—" faltered Ruth, forced to own to herself than an aunt who is anxious to become a mother-in-law cannot always be quite a mother. "She has a child of her own, you know."

"That may make a difference. My Aunt Sarah Coombs brought me up, and she was never married. I think she loved me full as well as if I 'd been her own, and William—well, as if he were her grandchild; I can't say more than that. She only died a few years ago; she was a great sufferer for a long time; and William was as devoted to her all through! it was wonderful to see a man, and a great strong man, too, so tender and thoughtful; no one who had n't seen him with her could guess what he really is."

At this opportune moment, Mrs. Noyes's praises of her son, which might have lost their effect from too much repetition, were cut short by a rattle at the latch. "Why!" she exclaimed, "that can't be William! He 's only

just gone to his office! I wonder whatever brought him back!"

Ruth thought she knew, and for one moment was bitterly vexed with herself and him. Reflection must have shown her that he could not possibly have guessed at her being there, but the rush of genuine surprise to his face gave her no time or need for it. "I only wanted—" he began to his mother—"I beg your pardon, Miss Wentworth! I am very glad to see you."

"Yes, Miss Wentworth has been good enough to make me such a pleasant call," said Mrs. Noyes; "perhaps, now you 're here, she 'll excuse me a minute;" and to Ruth, "You 'll surely stay and have a cup of tea?"

"Oh, no, I thank you! I could n't wait."

"Why not?" asked William, and Ruth had no reason to give. He stood looking down upon her with such delight that her little scruples faded in its glow. Why should she not make him happy, just by being so herself? She bowed assent, and Mrs. Noyes, delighted, said Miss Wentworth must taste her gingerbread, made by an old Bethel receipt. She wanted to show that if five o'clock tea were the mode, she could do the proper thing as well as anybody, and she had as pretty china as need be, though most of it reposed the year round on the shelves. She hurried off to produce these treasures, and William said, without a sign of doubt in the

hearty ring of his voice, "It is very kind of you to come and see my mother."

"I always wanted to. I do wish to know her; and I never dreamed of seeing you."

"I know that," he said, smiling.

"But I really am glad to see you. I wanted to tell you how much afraid I am that I have not showed you sufficiently how much I feel your great kindness to Roland. I did not realize it fully at first—how much we all owe you—how much I owe you—for I suppose——"

"That it was done for your sake? So it was. But you owe me nothing. I cannot bear that you should feel as if you did. Don't you know that you are my own very self, a dearer, more precious self?—that what I do for you is not felt, except as a happiness to me? Dearest Ruth"—he had taken her hand in his by this time, and now there was no interruption. Mrs. Noyes did not hurry back with her tea-tray, and when she came, she saw that the young people had not counted the moments. She understood the situation perfectly, and they were all very happy together, though no word of intelligence passed among them. Perhaps Mrs. Noyes was the happiest of the three, such undoubting confidence did she feel in dear William's power to vanquish all obstacles.

Dear William thought he could himself, but the how was not very perceptible to him, and

not at all to Ruth, whose face grew graver as she exchanged an affectionate farewell with her hostess, and the host took up his hat to accompany her.

"I wish you would let me tell her," he began, as they walked off together.

"Tell whom? Your mother? Why, what is there to tell—yet?"

"It 's well you put in that 'yet' or I should think you meant to back out of it again, and that I can't allow, you know. I am sure she guesses, and it would make her so happy to hear something from me."

"I suppose she ought," allowed Ruth, with a sigh. "Oh, yes, tell her from me, with my dearest love. I do love her, very much. Only, please beg her not to breathe a single word about it to any one. No one else ought to know before my father does."

"Then I 'll tell him directly."

"Oh!"

"I entirely agree with you. He ought to know at once. I can't live without seeing you, and I can't bear to meet you round by chance this way. I want to come to your house as a man should."

"He 'll never allow that! He 'll be very angry, I 'm afraid."

"Then I must meet you somewhere else with his knowledge; that 's the only proper

way. There!" as Winslow Hall met them and passed quickly, taking off his hat with an air of intelligence, "I do believe every soul in Bethel knows it by this time."

"I don't think any of my family have the least idea."

"Then they will have very good reason to complain if you don't tell them directly."

"My aunt—I know my aunt will be hurt—disappointed; oh, I don't mean that she has any right to object to you, but——"

"I understand, dear; but the sooner she hears it the better, or she will have good right to feel hurt. What 's the use of waiting? Let them all know to-night."

"Oh, I could n't! Not quite yet!"

"Why, you poor little pet, if it is going to be such a terribly hard matter, leave it to me. The quicker your father hears it, the quicker he 'll be reconciled to it; for, of course, he must be."

"Oh, I don't know!"

"Come—don't you believe I can take care of you?"

"Yes, indeed, only——"

"Then let me walk right in with you, and if he is n't at home, I'll stay till he comes."

"Oh, do, do wait a little! Please, please do! To please me—won't you?"

"Till to-morrow, then?"

"Till day after to-morrow!"

"I don't quite like it; but to please you, my darling, I 'll do a great deal. Till day after to-morrow, then; but you must n't ask me to wait an instant longer."

Ruth gave a yielding sigh.

"Have you told your sister?"

"Told whom? Oh, you mean Bertha! Oh, no, I should never say anything about such a thing to her!"

"Still, I think you should be friendly with her."

"Oh, yes!" assented Ruth, indifferently; "but I can never love her as I used to hope I should love Roland's wife. Poor Roland!"

"Nevertheless, I do believe that it has been the very best thing for him. Have you noticed how much better he looks since his marriage? He 's like a different being."

Ruth, when the question was put, was forced to acknowledge to herself Roland's improved appearance, though thinking that even William did not know everything; and now they neared Wentworth House, and William, true to his promise, reluctantly bade her good-night.

"Ruth looks uncommon pretty to-night," said Bertha to Roland, before dinner.

"Now you mention it, I think she does."

"She 's been walking with Mr. Noyes. I

saw them at the corner when I was coming home."

"And pray," returned Roland, with a look at his wife's radiant face, "whom have you been walking with?"

"Guess!"

"Not Charley, for he 's been with me. Perhaps you 've been shopping at Manningham's?"

"No. I 've been calling on a lady."

"A spiritual seance at your mother's, hey? If they produce such effects, I should think she would charge higher for them."

Bertha only laughed. She had been calling at Mrs. Binney's, and that lady, in her accustomed *rôle* of family providence, had given her some pretty presents, and asked her if she would not like to take singing lessons. Roland had said she had a good voice, if untrained, and Mrs. Binney knew an excellent teacher who wanted vacation pupils, and whom she was glad to help. Bertha thanked her warmly, saying she should be glad of any chance to improve herself. But Mrs. Binney still looked unsatisfied, and, after a brief pause, said, with more hesitation than she was wont to show, that it was very nice for young wives to have a little money among their gifts; there were so many little daily wants one could never anticipate, that—if Bertha would accept

a trifle—and she apologetically filled up the blank by presenting a roll of crisp new bank-notes.

"I never, never knew any one could be as good as you are!" cried the girl, with tears in her eyes.

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Binney, reprovingly; but she said no more. Something in Bertha's face gave her a taste of keener pleasure than she often won by giving. She seems a warm-hearted child, she thought; it is a pity that she was not brought up to exercise more self-control.

Bertha flew homeward light as air, the precious gift warm in her hand. This surely was her own, to use at her own pleasure, and she would open an account at the Savings Bank, to accumulate toward the payment of that debt. Roland always had money in his pockets, and would always give her some if she asked him, and the pockets, like the widow's cruse, would be full again on the morrow; but she could not bear to drain his relations in such a way, for such a purpose.

She was happy, indeed too happy, with that excess of joy which always brings about its own revenge. At dinner, which Charley attended, she was in overflowing spirits, her tongue looser, her laugh louder, than any one in Wentworth house had ever heard them before. Ruth was

grave and said as little as might be; but Charley was always ready to respond; and Mr. Wentworth gradually awoke to keen interest, and wrinkled up his face, like a hound scenting game. He looked intelligently from time to time at Roland, who answered with an occasional flash of languid amusement from his beautiful eyes, and a faint suggestive smile, flitting along the still plastic curve of his exquisite mouth. At last, at something Bertha said, there was a moment's silence, and then a sudden meaning laugh from Mr. Wentworth, while poor Charley, struggling ineffectually with his, made it more noticeable by the effort. Ruth looked bewildered a moment, and then quietly rose and left the room.

"What 's the matter?" cried Bertha.

"Nothing," said Roland, gravity itself, "only my sister is not accustomed to the style of talk your mother and her circle indulge in."

Now it was Bertha's turn to look bewildered, while the men all laughed again, even Roland, who had never noticed his sister's confusion by so much as a glance. Bertha sat through it all in silence, and did not leave the room till etiquette allowed. But she passed an hour of misery. It was not the first time she had perceived that she stood on a very different level in Roland's mind—in his speech, his thought,

his unconscious instinct—from his sister; but now for the first time a withering doubt possessed her, as to whether, this being so, she ought to have married him. She knew that in the scene just passed she had been as innocent in intent as Ruth herself; but she never made that plea. "Some girl brought up different from me, some one like Ruth, might have kept him better, after all," she thought. "She 'd have done it, oh, she 'd have done it without trying or knowing, only just by being what I can't be, if I should try a thousand years. It 's not my fault; but it can't be helped!" she kept on repeating to herself, her sentences linking on to each other in one unceasing round from which her thoughts could not escape—the boundary within which madness lies.

But Bertha was no subject for insanity, even of the most incipient kind. Her reason could convince her will, and her will could call her reason into play. "Come now!" she said to herself at last; "this ain't any manner of use. I 'm Roland's wife. A woman that 's been a wife can't ever be anything else. And all the girls in his own set ain't like Ruth. No, indeed! He might have had one like that Lewis girl, always prying, and guessing, and wanting to know about things she has n't any chance of ever being let to do. And then," she concluded, with a thrill of returning animation,

painful, but grateful, as when the blood begins to circulate in a torpid limb, "I 'd like to see one of 'em, good or bad, that could train the old man as I mean to do before I leave off."

XXIV

BRIDGING A TORRENT

"RUTH!" began Mr. Wentworth, as he entered the house the next morning.

"Yes — please!" answered his daughter, through the open door of the parlor, trembling at his tone. The idea flashed upon her that William had broken his promise; but she repelled it, as a second flash assured her that he would never have left her to bear the consequences without his support. Her father, meanwhile, floundered into the room and staggered against the table with something like the half-blind rage of a rhinoceros.

"So it was you," he panted, "who got the money paid for that check, you ——, and it was that —— who helped you!" —the blanks were filled up with words unprecedented in Ruth's experience, though she had heard her father swear before. She gave a frightened gasp, and caught hold of Bertha, who sat near her.

"Do you deny it?"

"She is n't going to say anything till you

use different language; you ain't fit to talk to a respectable young woman," interposed Mrs. Roland, valiantly.

"Well, plainly, then, did that —— Noyes pay for that check? You need n't tell any lies about it. Finnegan told me himself."

"I 'd like to know who 's most likely to tell lies, she or Finnegan," said Bertha. "But we scorn falsehood; Mr. Noyes did pay for the check."

"And who paid him?" snarled Wentworth, turning again on his daughter; "and what did you pay him with? A man does n't give a girl money for nothing, I take it."

"You need n't go putting everything onto her," Bertha interposed again. "I had as much to do with it as she had."

"Oh, you are probably accustomed to that sort of thing; but I thought Ruth's precious aunt had brought her up differently."

"Clear out, why don't you?" whispered Bertha to Ruth, and seconded her words by a push of no doubtful character, which sent the trembling girl half through the doorway, while Bertha, closing the door, and putting her own substantial person before it, calmly inquired, looking full at her father-in-law, "Have you anything else to say?"

"Plenty—if you want to hear it."

"You need n't think I want to hear any of

your nasty stuff; but if you want to let off, go ahead and have it over; I have something to say myself."

Wentworth's color began to run in streaks through the yellow paleness of his face. He drew a deep breath, and seemed for the moment unable to speak.

"Very well," said Bertha, seizing the chance; "now let 's understand each other once for all. First place, Mr. Noyes did pay for that check, though not the face value of it, by a long chalk; and he 's going to be paid every cent he gave, and Ruth is n't going to have anything to do with it. Roland 's going to, or I am, which comes to the same thing. Next place, Ruth 's going to marry him, and you may as well make up your mind to it. By the time she 's ready, I guess you 'll be. Now blow off, if you like, but don't take too long about it, for there 's an omelette soufflé for dinner, and it will be spoiled if it is n't served up on time; and you had better go and dress; your shirt needs changing awfully."

While Bertha uttered this harangue she eyed her father-in-law in a manner imitated from her mother on like occasions. Mr. Smutt, to be sure, was a meek man; none more so; but there were times, though not often, when he would indemnify himself for his down-trodden state by drinking to excess; and then he would

be cross and threatening to the women and children, till awed by Mrs. Van Winkle's majestic mien, which her daughter, assisted by the powers of youth and beauty, copied with heightened effect. "I don't believe the old fellow 's drunk," she thought to herself, "and if he is n't, he won't be likely to throw anything at me. Anything else I don't mind, as long as there 's no one else round."

Wentworth proved more amenable, even, than she had hoped. He shifted himself from one foot to the other, breathed heavily again, while his mouth worked strangely, then, with a heavier tread than of wont, ascended to his own room. The poor old thing! thought Bertha, he 'll have a stroke, most likely, if this goes on! Pity for him began to stir warm at her heart, and she resolved that his dinner should be a soothing feast. But to this end, it would be best to have Ruth safe out of reach, and she ran lightly upstairs and tapped at the young girl's door. No answer came, and she tried it, to find it, as she expected, locked. Never mind, she thought, I can get round through the big closet in my room; she won't think to lock that; and she proceeded to effect an unceremonious entrance to the pretty chamber where Ruth lay, never stirring since she had first flung herself on the sofa and buried her face deep in the pillows.

"Come, Ruth, I would n't mind it. He was awful mad, but it 'll blow over."

No answer.

"Come, I 'd get up."

"I can't—I can't! Oh, go away, please, and leave me alone!"

"I don't like to do that. I suppose you won't quite feel like coming down to dinner—" and as Ruth shuddered, "well, I would n't advise you to. He 'd better be kept quiet for a while."

"I can't see him—I never can see him," was all that could be gathered from Ruth's sobs.

"I would n't yet. I don't wonder you don't like to. I 'll tell you what, you 'd better go round to your aunt's for a day or two. Hurry up a bit, and I 'll run round with you, and come back for dinner. There, now, don't feel so down about it!" as she took Ruth's hat from the peg, and gave the feather a twirl. "It 's a trial, of course, but I don't see as we can help it. He says a great deal more than he means, as folks do when they 're in a passion. There, that 's right," as Ruth slowly dragged herself up to a sitting posture, with her usual instinct of stopping Bertha's talk by following her advice.

"I can't bear to think—that I ever heard such things," she faltered. "What if he should say them to any one else? It would kill me."

"Oh, no, it would n't. I don't believe he will, and if he does, no one will think anything about it. Why, any one can see that Mr. Noyes is not at all that sort of man!"

Ruth shrank away in horror at such ineradicable coarseness of mind. That her William—whom she had just begun shyly to call to herself by that name—that he should be even thought of as "that sort of man"! Why, who had ever before dared to hint to her that that sort of man so much as existed? Even Wentworth himself, though often indulging in profanity before his daughter, had hitherto preserved a certain decorum in its quality. She could almost suspect that he had forgotten himself to-day because of Bertha's presence. But Bertha, who knew all about that sort of man, honestly believed that she had made the most comforting speech in her power.

"Your aunt will take care of you and pet you up," she added, as if coaxing a child.

"I do not want to go there," said Ruth, drying her tears, determined to give Bertha no more excuse for familiarity.

"I dare say not. Only I can't think of any better place, or any other place you can go to, all of a sudden like this. You need n't tell her why you left, you know. Just say there 's been a row at home, and, like as not, she 'll think your father and I 've been quarrelling;

only I 'd tell her, first chance you get, that you 're engaged to Mr. Noyes. It is n't right not to let her know."

These remarks made Ruth hasten her few preparations, and she hurried off, declining any escort very decidedly. Bertha gave a few finishing touches to her own costume, and descended to dinner, at which meal Mr. Wentworth at first sat wrapped in sulky silence. But the dinner was a good one, and specially to his taste. Bertha was attentive, and almost affectionate, and Roland, excited by her dexterous management, was full of wit and drollery. By the time the master of the house had eaten his second helping of omelette soufflé, he began to feel the charm of home.

XXV

MEETING STREAMS

RUTH, meanwhile, pale and weary, had been caressed and petted by her aunt, who was quite as ready to think Bertha in fault as that young woman had anticipated. Ruth felt that she owed some gratitude to her sister-in-law, and tried to defend her, but she could not enter into particulars, and her defence was not very effective. Mrs. Binney sent her niece to bed early, and she was glad to go; but when in the morning she asked for the first time in her healthy young life to be allowed to stay there, the aunt was aghast. She felt the girl's pulse, which seemed to her a little quick; she felt her forehead and hands, and could not truthfully aver that they were too hot; but the unusual irritation with which these investigations were met alarmed her, and she suggested sending for the doctor, which proposal Ruth protested against with a determination unprecedented in her aunt's experience of her. She only wanted to be let alone; and alone at last Mrs. Binney left her, to wander herself restlessly about the

house, and try in vain to settle down to her morning's duties. She longed for more confidence from her niece, but she could not press for it, and there was no one else there—not even Charley—to whom she might appeal for advice.

About eleven o'clock, when her anxiety had reached its climax, and she was meditating on the step of sending for the doctor on her own responsibility, a servant announced that Mr. Noyes was in the parlor, and had asked to see Miss Ruth.

"Please tell him Miss Ruth has a bad headache and can see no one this morning."

The man departed, and Mrs. Binney stood wondering till he came back with, "Mr. Noyes wants very much to see you a few moments, if you please, ma'am."

What possible business can he have? thought Mrs. Binney. What can it be? and, provoked at her attention being distracted, she went wearily into her drawing-room.

"I hope Miss Wentworth is not very ill," began the visitor, eagerly. His air of morning health and vigor jarred upon his hostess, who answered with some reserve, "Oh, no—I hope not—a slight headache."

"I dare say," said William, looking at her understandingly, "but does she know that I am here?"

"I did not think best to disturb her; but if you want to leave any message, I shall be very happy to——"

"I am sure she will come down when she hears it is I," broke in William. "I am afraid she had a very disagreeable time yesterday evening. I never intended her father should know till I had explained matters to him myself. But most unfortunately he found out something, I may say everything, and came home rather out of temper, and, Mrs. Wentworth says, made himself somewhat disagreeable. I have seen him now, and put the case plainly before him, and though he is n't in a very amiable mood just yet, I think he will cool down in a few days; indeed, I do not see what else there is left for him to do. Please excuse my speaking so plainly, but——"

Speaking plainly was the very last thing of which Mrs. Binney could accuse him; but though his words said so little, there was something so eloquent in his look and manner, that a great wave of surprised comprehension, or rather a struggle not to comprehend, made her turn faint and giddy, and she said, imploringly, "I beg your pardon, I am sure, but I don't quite understand what you mean."

"I beg *your* pardon! I thought Ruth must have told you! I hope she is not worse than you think!" cried the lover, instantly alarmed.

"Oh, no, really, she is not ill at all," replied Mrs. Binney, only too sure that her words were true.

"Ruth and I only met this spring, but I loved her almost at the first moment. It has been very hard for us to meet. I could not go to her father's till I had a right to speak to him openly, and it was not till yesterday that we fully understood each other."

"Do you mean that Ruth has accepted you?"

"You can call it that if you like," answered the young man, with a smile. "We have known each other's love for some time; but, of course, there was a good deal in our way; and even now, I am afraid that there will be much that is hard for her to go through. You know what Mr. Wentworth is. A daughter must feel it. I am sure it is only that which has kept her from speaking to you. You have been a second mother to her, and we shall both of us, always, feel the deepest gratitude."

Mrs. Binney was silent.

"You will not blame her, I am sure. It is a very trying position for her, and I am afraid she hardly dares to let herself be happy. You will help her, I know;" and as still no words replied, he thought: I suppose she is a little disappointed; but how ridiculous of her! She had no business to dream of such an absurdity

as my beautiful Ruth's marrying that idiot of a son of hers! It would have been disgusting!

In this summary fashion did the young man sweep away every hope of the pale, courteous hostess before him. What business, thinks youth, have the old with any hopes of their own? They ought to be satisfied with seeing the young attain theirs. William was considerate enough not to look at Mrs. Binney; and he refrained, for the present, from entering on the subject of Roland's forgery, though he fully intended that the Binneys should eventually pay one third of the sum. Another third must come by hook or by crook out of Wentworth's pockets; and he was willing to make a gift of the last. But there was plenty of time to settle that.

"I am afraid there are a great many difficulties to be encountered before you can ever hope to marry Ruth," said Mrs. Binney, at last. "Mr. Wentworth is a very determined man. I think you will find it impossible to gain his consent."

"I dare say he will make a fuss about it," said William, tranquilly; "but I expect he will have nothing for it but to give in after a while. I know I can make Ruth happy."

"That may be; but you know, Mr. Noyes, how often and how prominently you have been opposed to him in public affairs. I don't wish

to defend my poor brother-in-law; but do you think it would be quite proper, quite fitting, for you and his daughter to marry each other?"

She was answered by an actual hearty laugh from William. "Proper? Fitting? I beg your pardon, Mrs. Binney, but we 've gone too far now to mind trifles. If I were a beggar, or if there were anything against my character, I hope I should know better than to propose to any girl. You need n't worry about Ruth. I can give her a good home and a good name. We are young enough, and strong enough, and we love each other enough to make our way."

He looked so straight and handsome and happy that Mrs. Binney's sense of the fitness of things began to turn in his favor. She still thought him no match for her niece; but she could not say so to his face—nay, she blushed inwardly at the thought, as she said, almost humbly:

"Do not think me unkind, Mr. Noyes; it is natural that I should dread more trouble for my dear niece than perhaps is really to be feared. If she loves you, she shall never hear a word in opposition from me."

"You are very good and kind," said the young man, gratefully taking her hand. The tears sprang to her eyes, and she hurried out of the room. "I will ask Ruth to come down," she said, as she closed the door.

This last effort was spared her by Bertha, whom she met in the hall, and who was very willing to accept the office Mrs. Binney was thankful to resign. The bright look of intelligence and interest that flashed across the younger woman's face gave another pang to the aunt, who went away to her own room, and tried, alone, to imagine what life was to be for her now.

"Come!" cried Bertha, opening Ruth's door as soon as she had knocked at it, "get up and come down-stairs! He 's here! He 's here!"

"Who 's here?" said Ruth, languidly. "Oh—Mr. Noyes? What made him come?"

"You 'd better ask him," said Bertha, laughing.

"How did he know I was here?"

"Why, I told him, if you want to know. He called this morning and had it out with the old gentleman. But he can tell you better about that himself."

"I do not feel as if I could ever see him again. I never, never can forget—what happened yesterday. What if—— *he* should have said anything about it to——?"

"I really don't think he 'd do that: and if he did, William would n't listen to it."

"Did my aunt—what did she say?"

"Oh, she 's all right; she asked me to tell you he was here. I don't suppose she likes it,

but that can't be helped; she 'll get over it. Come, Ruth, cheer up! You 've had your troubles: but you 'll get over them, as long as it 's William Noyes you 're going to marry."

Ruth sighed, but allowed herself to be persuaded, and Bertha, thinking that the lovers would prefer her room to her company, flew home to communicate the tidings to Roland, who took them coolly. "It 's a misfortune," he said, "that 's partly tantine's fault and partly mine. I 've done the things I ought not to have done, and she 's left undone the things she ought to have done."

"It 's a first rate thing for Ruth, anyhow."

"I don't know. I suppose she thinks she loves Bill Noyes, and so she may. When they 're married, she 'll dote upon him. But, then, she could just as well have doted upon Charley, and it would have been a great deal more convenient."

"For shame!" cried Bertha. "I suppose there are girls who don't want to marry anybody, but that don't mean that there are n't people they don't want to marry more than they don't others."

"My angel, you are growing brilliant by intercourse with me. That last was absolutely epigrammatical! But you really must try and cultivate your grammar a little."

XXVI

A BRIDE IN WHITE

THE awkward position of affairs in the Wentworth family was relieved, in the simplest manner, by the death of Uncle James Halstead—a peaceful end, and at his post. He had always been devoted to the family interests, but he had seldom done them greater service in his lifetime than he did in leaving it. The funeral, and the mourning, and the business arrangements, enforced the postponement of all other matters. As soon as the first necessary arrangements were over Mrs. Binney left Bethel, for a rest at her son's beautiful place at Beverly Farms. No one wondered that Ruth did not accompany her, for all the family said dear Harriet and dear Ruth both needed an entire change, and had better go to new and different surroundings. Ruth went to Nahant to stay with Mrs. Burgess, who never knew half that went on in her own house, where William Noyes could come and go as often as Miss Wentworth wished; and gradually it came to

be breathed among the family connection that there was an "understanding" between the young people, sufficient to allow Ruth to visit Mrs. Noyes afterward with all due decorum, though, of course, just then, nothing could be really "announced."

Mrs. Binney had her son and nephew to bear her company most of the time. Charley's society was rather more of a strain upon her nerves than usual, owing to his being in such a perfectly contented and even jolly frame of mind. Could he have shown the least symptom of pining for his fair cousin, and called forth a little anxiety on his mother's part, it would have been more soothing to her. But Roland could love and pet and comfort a woman far better than any other woman could: and he never lavished more tenderness on any one than he did on his aunt. Bertha came once or twice when propriety demanded, but had the sense to send her husband by himself whenever she could. She had enough to do at home in allaying another tremendous outburst of rage in which her father-in-law exploded on learning the "scandalous abomination" (I quote his mildest expression) of William Noyes's being left executor —and without bonds, too!—of Mr. Halstead's last will and testament.

The Halstead estate was a neat little old-fashioned New England fortune, estimated at a

couple of hundred thousand dollars, and realizing about half as much again. About a third was left in legacies and bequests, and the rest, following the law of attraction, went to swell Mrs. Binney's abundant means, and was as gratefully received as if she had been a poorer woman; for, lapped in luxury as she was, she often needed a little more ready money. Roland and Ruth, who might have had more had the testator been aware of the extent of his means, were remembered with twenty thousand apiece, invested in securities that were quoted at a premium of three and a half, and brought six per cent. A large portion of the will was devoted to tying up Ruth's share out of the reach of any possible husband, and Roland's, to his wife's thankfulness, out of his own.

All this took time, but one evening, as early in the winter as propriety would allow, Mrs. Binney gave an immense reception, at which no expense was spared and to which special trains loaded with guests came from Boston, partly to introduce Mrs. Roland Wentworth, and partly to celebrate the engagement of Miss Wentworth and Mr. Noyes. It was a most brilliant affair, and the two young heroines of the occasion fairly divided the palm of beauty; at least, so said the newspapers, and they were not far astray; for, though Ruth's reputation

as the beauty of her whole acquaintanceship had reached an unassailable point, Bertha, dazzling in full dress and radiant spirits, carried off an equal amount of admiration, from the men, at least. Even William expressed his a little too strongly for Ruth's comprehension. The women were ready to talk and to wonder; but hints slipped off from the impenetrable high breeding of Mrs. Binney and Ruth like water from a rock, and their friends could only agree with the flood of talk which Miss Lewis poured forth upon the "loveliness" of both young couples. Society had its cue, and Mrs. Roland Wentworth was formally admitted into it.

William Noyes needed no assistance toward that end. He already ranked as a good match even for Miss Wentworth. He had received the most flattering offers from many quarters, and one from Chicago, to act as legal adviser for the Arctic and Antarctic Railroad, the prospects contingent on which proved sufficient to counterbalance his love for his native town; and to the astonishment of her family, Ruth was quite willing to go there with him. "William thinks" was already the one sufficient reason on her tongue. They went off together into the world with all that readiness for a change which more than aught else marks youth, and the absence of which more than aught else makes age sadly feel how very old it must be getting.

Mrs. Noyes was aghast at first, but William's will was her law, and he settled it all in a twinkling for her: how she was to spend every winter with the young couple, still retaining her home in Bethel, which would be a pleasant place for them to visit her in the summers, and Ruth seconded him with every sweet assurance that a daughter could give.

There was no such compensation to Mrs. Binney for the loss of her darling out of her daily life. But she only went about a little paler and more silent than was her wont, loading Ruth with every imaginable article of use or luxury, and listening while the happy girl dilated on her hopes and plans. Ruth's confidence now flowed as freely to her aunt as ever; she had nearly forgotten that Mrs. Binney could ever have cherished other plans for her. Of course, Aunt Harriet must see the folly of them herself now, if indeed she had ever wished for them, and she must love William when she knew him.

Mrs. Binney, indeed, could not help liking William, who was as ready as Ruth to appeal for her sympathy, and who was very willing to be cautioned by her about "taking care of the dear child," who might have been going with him into a Siberian exile by the way her family and friends spoke of her destination. But it pleased as well as amused him, and he was

quite ready to follow Mrs. Binney's counsel to secure a house on the "North Side," which was, she believed, a comparatively civilized quarter of Chicago.

The wedding was fixed for an early date in the spring. As William was a very decided Unitarian, Ruth made her final religious choice, and was married in the First Church, with all due pomp and ceremony. All the relations said that Mr. Wentworth was quite satisfied with his daughter's choice, and that any little differences between him and Mr. Noyes had been reconciled.

It was more than could have been expected that he should appear to give away the bride at the altar; but neither did he appear to forbid the banns. His absence was accounted for by the decorous excuse of a fit of bilious gout, chosen by Roland as the most natural complaint for him to endure on the occasion; and Roland took his place, and acted the part, as he could any part, with a touching display of the proper emotions. It was so much the custom for Mrs. Binney to do everything for the Wentworths, that no one thought it odd that the reception should take place at her house.

XXVII

UNREAD STARS

WILLIAM NOYES grew in means and fame. The time soon came when he was regarded as one of the glories of the Wentworth connection, and a fountain of help by its more impecunious members. He and his wife came back year after year, stouter, handsomer, and happier, with a growing family, and a growing retinue of nurses and governesses to match, till they finally took up their permanent summer abode on a superb estate at Manchester-by-the-Sea. It was by that time only a trifling expense for them to keep up their Bethel house for occasional flying visits, to give their children — of whom even such as were born in Chicago were supposed to be of a superior race to its other natives—some "Bethel influence." By that time, William could cross the threshold of Wentworth House at his own pleasure. Its master, broken and quiet, heeded little who went or came, except now and then to ask the name of one or other of his daugh-

ter's children as they scampered past his chair, or to brighten feebly at the sight of a little form more familiar to him; the only one who could win a smile from him.

Bertha succeeded in keeping Roland "straight," as she phrased it, for about three years. She could never urge him to the point of doing anything in particular beyond hanging on as a pensioner on his father and the Binneys, in the elegant leisure of society; but that was much by comparison. When she felt that her own attractions might be losing their power, she brought a new one into play at the most opportune moment. The very sight of the young mother, with her beautiful boy in her arms, captivated all beholders, and won the hearts of the most critical relatives; and Roland, a fond father, was for some time wholly absorbed in this new pleasure, and the accompanying revival of his waning passion for his wife. Whether the divine wonder of infancy would have had power to charm a second time mattered not. If it were Bertha's last resource, she needed no other. Roland, with all his flush of health and nervous vigor, had no reserve strength, and, weak as water in all moral energies, had no more hold on life than on any other force. He had only been married three years, when a cold, caught in duck-shooting on the Wessex marshes, developed into rapid

consumption before any one but his wife had taken the alarm.

It was to sit by Roland's bed, as she had sat by his mother's, that Mrs. Binney broke the vow of many years, and passed the doors of Wentworth House. Mrs. Van Winkle, too, came with real concern for her daughter, whom she tried to help to the best of her ability. She made some effort to give her son-in-law the benefit of her ministrations, but Bertha set her face firmly against them. "I let you fuss over me when little Roland was born," she said, "because it pleased you, and I did n't see as it could do any harm, but this is different;" and Roland himself found some amusement in declining any introduction to his mother-in-law's "spirit friends," who might, he remarked, turn out inconvenient acquaintances.

Ruth and William came at the last, and Roland enjoyed having his sister with him, and particularly liked having her and his wife about him at once, as if to please himself with the assurance that their own choice drew them together. William was devoted and dexterous, but somehow Roland, and Bertha, too, preferred Charley's blundering, awkward attentions. Poor Charley, like a faithful dog, lay across the threshold of Roland's room by night, or crouched in a corner by day, ready to come at a call.

"He 's in excellent training for your number two, Bertie," said Roland one day to his wife, when Charley had shambled out of the room to countermand for the second time an order which his capricious taste had twice given and withdrawn; and as a quickened movement of the hand which was slowly and patiently waving back and forth a fan over him betrayed some impatience of the idea, he went on, "I do really mean it."

"O Roland, don't!"

"Yes, I do. You have n't had any great comfort out of my sex yet, there 's no denying that; you ought to give them a chance to make it up to you somehow; and Charley 's the only one of them I should n't mind your marrying."

Bertha laid her cheek against his hand for a moment. She could not trust herself to speak, for it was too late for Roland to bear any excitement now.

"Besides, if you don't take him, he 'll be left by natural selection to Sarah, and I 'm sure he 's too good for that, and then," with a sudden catch in his throat that came almost like a sob, "there 's tantine—I do want to give her something, and I 've nothing else. Poor tantine; she has n't had very much out of life, either. There—there, child, don't take on," as his head began to move to and fro restlessly on the pillow; "you 'll make me cough, and I

can't cough any more. I've made my last will and testament, and you sha'n't be plagued with it again. Oh, the devil!" as a sudden fit of coughing shook him all over; "never mind, Bertie, it was n't your fault."

Bertha wiped his forehead very slowly and carefully, and then after the cough had ceased from sheer exhaustion, and he had closed his eyes, she slipped out of the room. "Suppose," she said to Ruth, who waited outside, "you were to go and sit with him a bit."

"Oh, yes, indeed! and do, do go and rest. You look so tired!"

"Thank you," said Bertha. But after five minutes by herself, she might have been heard in her kitchen, giving her orders vigorously right and left, and arranging with her cook for a dinner which might tempt Mr. Wentworth.

Poor Roland's epitaph had been written for him long before his day by the hand that has written one for all of us. There was not one who knew him who could not have better spared a better man. There was one universal burst of sorrow, for which those who sorrowed eagerly sought relief in lavishing every demonstration of sympathy and pity on his youthful widow; and Bertha took it all with patient gratitude. She let Sarah Lewis sentimentalize to her heart's content over flowers and mourn-

ing dresses. She let Mrs. Tom Silloway come and fold her in an effusive embrace, and take little Roland on her lap and cry and sob over him. She let Charley follow her about trying to help her, misplacing everything he touched, and perpetually calling for consolation. She saw, when the time came, hundreds of callers, and thanked them every one. She took especial pains to extend her expressions of gratitude personally to the Manninghams, who had sent her costly flowers, and to one or another old friend of her early days, who had bashfully offered cheap little remembrances of a like nature. She kept a careful watch over her father-in-law, whose decline in health and faculties had received a sharp impetus from this shock, and who was moody and listless, with occasional outbursts of temper. She could even, now that Roland was no longer there to be plagued by it, let her mother run on as she liked unchecked.

Mrs. Van Winkle had now the wished-for opportunity to "anoint the eyes of the blinded set of aristocratic slaves" into which her daughter had married "with self-evident spiritual truth;" and she did not spare it. Ruth, to be sure, avoided her presence entirely, making her recent bereavement an excuse. She had a half-acknowledged feeling that she could regard Bertha the more kindly the less she saw of

Mrs. Van Winkle. But Mrs. Binney, who made it her business to do everything that others shirked, tried hard to be civil to Mrs. Roland Wentworth's mother, and bore as patiently as Bertha herself with a long harangue on spheres and emanations.

"Would n't you enjoy an interview with dear Roland's astral presence?" wound up the lady. "I am sure, if you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, it might easily be managed. He is near, and craving to speak with you."

"No, thank you," said her daughter quietly.

"You harden your heart and set your face against all comfort," said Mrs. Van Winkle. "You are one of them that that noble woman teacher has written about, as had rather be a grub than a butterfly. Well, if you 'd rather grovel among the tombs than soar in the heavens, you 're the loser by it. It don't matter to society at large; that 's going on its God-appointed course, however some may struggle against it in their blind and ignorant conservatism."

Mrs. Binney strove to speak in vain. She could only bow a polite farewell to the prophetess, who walked off with an indignant toss of the head; but as soon as the door was closed she could not help turning to Bertha with, "Oh, my dear! is it not almost too much for you?"

"Oh, no," said Bertha; "it 's only their way. You 're not accustomed to her kind of talk as I am. It goes in at one ear and out of the other with me. And you must n't think too hardly of poor mother. She 's had a trying, grinding kind of life, and she never had any education to speak of. People must have something; and she never had the things you have, or any chance at them. And then, she would n't have talked that way if she 'd been alone with me. She thinks it her duty to bear testimony when others are present; that 's why."

"Yes—yes, indeed! I don't wish to say anything that could possibly hurt you, my dear. Don't think that for a moment. It was only for you—you have so much else to bear——"

"Oh!" cried Bertha; "what does that, or anything, matter to me now? What does anything matter but that Roland 's gone? And if that were only all—but it 's not. I would n't say it to any one but to you; but it was—so soon—and it will keep coming up to me that it may have been—better for him that it should be so!"

The elder woman had no words, but at her tender touch the younger's composure dissolved, and they wept together. Nothing more like this was ever said between them, but a link was knitted in that hour that was never to be undone; and they grew at last each to find

in the other her nearest earthly friend. Mrs. Binney's vow once broken, she came often to Wentworth House, to "try and be of some comfort to that poor dear child." People who came to comfort Bertha, generally found themselves accepting comfort from her, and it was not long before she was trying with all her might to persuade her aunt that Sarah Lewis, after all, would not make such a bad wife for her Charley; for to Miss Lewis did the prize ultimately fall. He was wretched about Roland, and Bertha was busily engaged with her father-in-law, who could not bear his presence. The poor fellow fell into Sarah's outstretched hand as easily as a ripe apple from a tree; and when she had him, she was so pleased with her prize that she could not treat him otherwise than well. To the world in general she would fain have presented a more lofty and forbidding demeanor, and she made some efforts toward that end; but the habit of years could not go for nothing. It was impossible for her to drop her "sweets" and "dears," and they rang more agreeably in the ears of her acquaintance when they came from one so highly placed. Against her will, she was forced to play to the end of her days the part of a woman amiable to a fault, and unspoiled by the temptations of wealth and prosperity.

What with city and country houses to keep

up, and foreign travel and yachting voyages, she and Charley were drawn more and more away from Bethel, and Mrs. Binney, left much alone, for visits to them, when most agreeable, were still a duty, found some variety even in the deep quiet of Wentworth House, broken only by little Roland's glee and frolic. He was the most beautiful of all the little cousinhood, and Mrs. Binney thought and said that she loved him as well as any; indeed, as he was most often seen by her, she probably loved him the best. He ran up and down the same old garden paths where Ruth used to dream her girlish dreams of the future. Bertha followed him slowly, keeping back her pace to the time of his grandfather's wheeled chair. Her dreams, when she had any, were of the past; but the daily life of her present, deadly monotonous as it might appear to lookers on, was full of interest to her. Her father-in-law's dwindling spark of life was long kept warm by her incessant care; and the unrecognized tenderness she lavished on him was no weariness to her. She had grown to love that feeble mockery of childhood which clung to her with such utter unconscious dependence, and she could not bear to look forward to the hour when her labors must cease, and the blank that must come before other duties and cares could gather again. Only now and then, when little

Roland ran up to her and clasped her knees, and she noticed how much higher year by year came the curls of already darkening gold, did the mother's heart glory in his waxing strength, and forecast the glories of youth and manhood—only for a moment. "Oh, no, my darling, no! that time will come too soon! Let mother keep her baby boy while she can, safe within the garden walls!"

"I do believe," said Ruth to her husband, now and again, "that Bertha has very little heart!"

"Why, what can make you think so? Mother and Aunt Harriet both say they never saw anything like the way she nursed poor Roland."

"Oh, yes, she 's a good nurse; she likes to do things for people; but I don't think she really cares for them the more for that."

"Now, my dear, you should not say that. How can any one know how much one person cares for another? Very likely she thinks you do not care for me. I 'm sure she was twice as affectionate to Roland before other people as you ever are to me."

"O William! William!" cried Ruth, her arms round her husband's neck in a close embrace, "suppose that—" and there were tears in her eyes and on her cheeks—"I can't bear to

think of it—but suppose I had lost you—could I ever bear to hear people talk of it, as she does? Could I ever breathe your name, except perhaps to your very dearest friends? Now, she 'll talk of Roland to any one who calls, just as if he were alive and here. I 've even heard her laugh at things people tell her of him when he was a boy, or at queer things Charley says about him."

"She is showing her regard for his memory by paying off his debts as fast as she can."

"Yes, that 's another thing. Where 's the use of it? As if she need pinch as she does to pay us! As if you could n't afford to give it to her, and be glad to do so! It seems to me petty-minded to care about such trifles—and between relations, too!"

"There, my dear, she is quite right. She wants her boy as he grows up to feel that his father's name is clear, and that he stands on an equal footing with his cousins. I respect her for it."

"Why, that is exactly what I mean. She has plenty of principle, and always does right. It 's heart she lacks. Little Roland, dear, sweet little fellow! You know how much care I took of him when his father was ill. I think he 's really as fond of me as he is of his mother, and she does n't seem to mind it one bit! She was pleased when I offered to take him down with

us to Manchester for the summer. She said it would give her more time to devote to father, and Roland needed the change of air, and would be perfectly happy with me. Fancy my ever letting Willie or Jamie get to care for another woman like that!"

"She is very good to your father—we ought to remember that."

"Good! I never said she was n't good; a great deal better than I am, I know; I only said she had n't much heart; the things are totally different. She was very good to Roland, too, if that is all you want in a wife; but I dare say she 'll marry again, and be just as good to somebody else!" and, to a disapproving look of her husband's: "Well, we won't talk of this any more. I know how highly you think of her, and I know she deserves it—only——"

Ruth paused in despair. "William thinks I don't appreciate Bertha," she went on to herself. "Very likely he thinks it 's jealousy; it 's so impossible to make a man understand!"

As a matter of fact, Bertha never did marry again; but none the less did she remain in Ruth's eyes forever capable of doing so.